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# A VALIANT IGNORANCE

BY  
MARY ANGELA  
DICKENS



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Dicke



## A VALIANT IGNORANCE

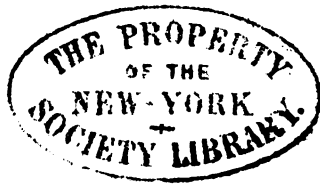


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A

# VALIANT IGNORANCE

A Nobel



BY

MARY ANGELA DICKENS

AUTHOR OF "A MERE CYPHER," ETC.

"Thy gold is brass!"

PRINCE HOHENSTIEL SCHWANGAU

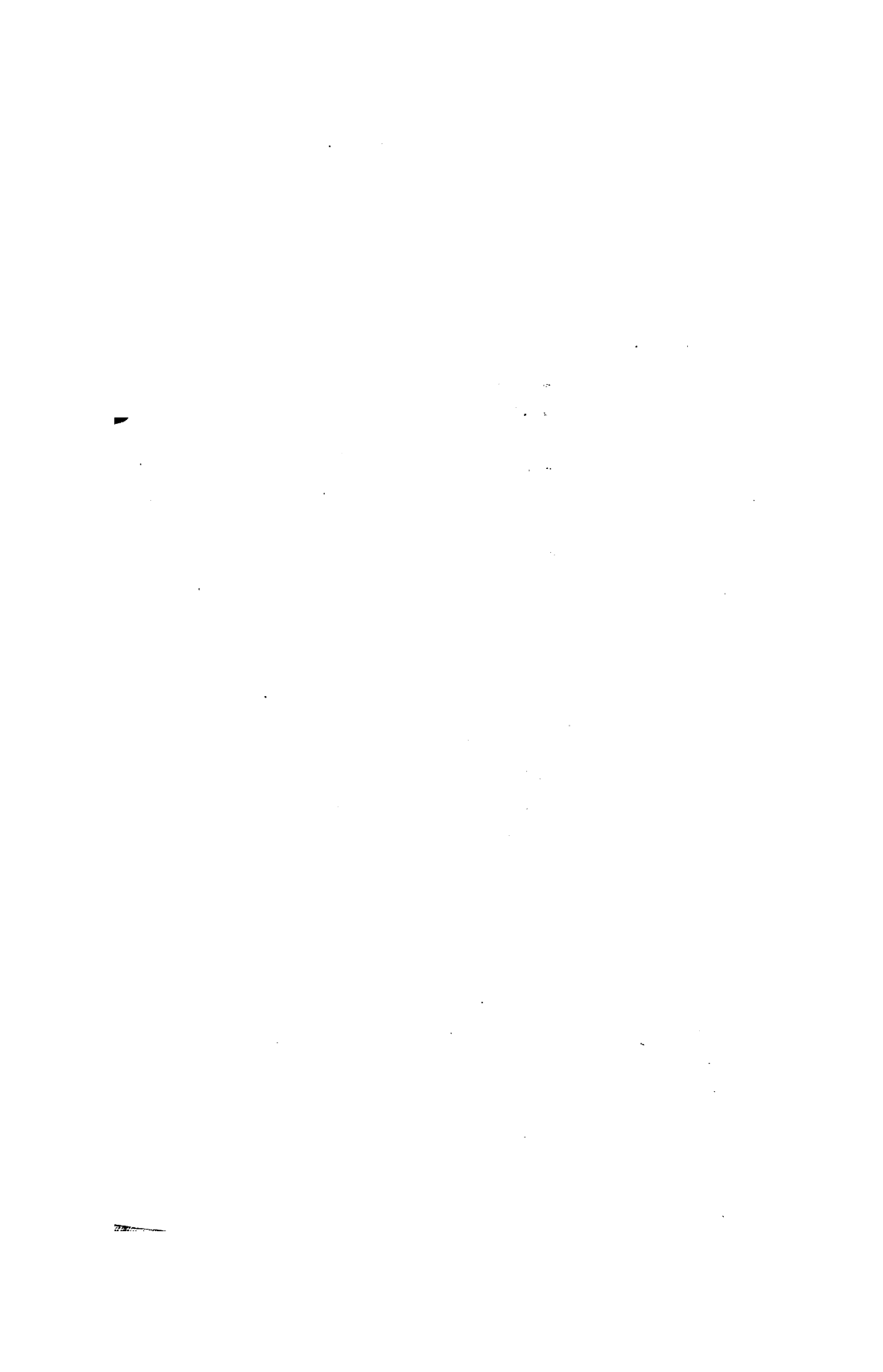
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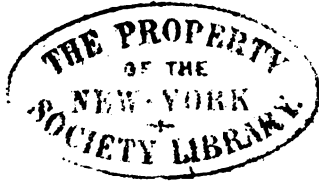
New York  
MACMILLAN AND CO.  
AND LONDON

1894

Go







# A VALIANT IGNORANCE

## CHAPTER I

"MY DEAR MAMMA,

"I hope you are quite well. I am quite well, and Smut is quite well. Her tail is very fat. I hope papa is quite well. I have a box of soldiers. The captain has a horse. Uncle Richard gave them to me. There is a hole in the horse, and he sticks in tight. Auntie is quite well, and so is nurse, and so is cook.

"I am, your loving Son,

"JULIAN."

It was the table d'hôte room of one of the best hotels in Nice; a large room, gay and attractive, according to its kind, as fresh paint, bright decoration, and expanse of looking-glass could make it. From end to end were ranged small tables, varying in size but uniform in the radiant spotlessness of their white cloths, and the brightness of their silver, china, or glass; and to and fro between the tables, and from the tables to the door, moved active waiters, whose one aim in life seemed to be the anticipation of the wishes of the visitors for whose pleasure alone they apparently existed.

It was early, and *déjeuner* proper was hardly in full swing as yet. But a good many of the tables were occupied, and a subdued hum of conversation pervaded the air; a hum compounded of the high-pitched chatter of American women and the quick, eager volubility of French tongues, backed by a less pronounced but perfectly perceptible undercurrent of German and English; the whole diversified now and then by a light laugh.

The sounds were subdued because the room was large



## A VALIANT IGNORANCE



"You don't say whether you are coming to London for the season? I asked Mr. Romaine, but he said he did not know what your plans were. I do so hope you will come, though I am afraid I should not be pleased if the spirit should move you to settle down in England and demand Julian! However, I suppose that is not very likely?"

"With much love, dear Hermia,

"Your very affectionate Cousin,

"FRANCES FALCONER."

Mrs. Romaine finished the letter, which she had read with leisurely calm, as though her interest in it was by no means of a thrilling nature, and then opened and glanced through the others which were waiting their turn. They were of various natures; one or two came from villas about Nice, and consisted of more or less pressing invitations; one was from a well-known leader of society in Rome—a long, chatty letter, which the recipient read with evident amusement and interest. There were also one or two bills, at which Mrs. Romaine glanced with the composure of a woman with whom money is plentiful.

Breakfast and correspondence were alike disposed of at last, and by this time the room was nearly full. The laughter and talk was louder now, the atmosphere of gaiety was more accentuated. Outside in the sunshine in the public gardens a band was playing. Mrs. Romaine was alone, it is true, and her voice consequently added nothing to the pervading note, but her presence, solitary as it was, was no jarring element. She was not lonely; her solitude was evidently an affair of the moment merely; she was absolutely in touch with the spirit of the hour, and no laughing, excited girl there witnessed more eloquently or more unconsciously to the all-pervading dominion of the pleasures of life than did the self-possessed looking little woman, to whom its pleasures were also its businesses—the only businesses she knew.

She had gathered her letters together, and was rising from her seat with a certain amount of indecision in her face, when a waiter entered the room and came up to her. "Some ladies wishing to see madame were in the salon," he said, and he handed her as he spoke a visiting-card bearing the name, "Lady Cloughton." Underneath the name was written in pencil, "An unconscionable hour to invade you, but we are

going this afternoon to La Turbie, and we hope we may perhaps persuade you to join us."

"The ladies are in the salon, you say?" said Mrs. Romaine, glancing up with the careless satisfaction of a woman to whom the turn of events usually does bring satisfaction; perhaps because her demands and her experience are alike of the most superficial description.

"In the salon, madame," returned the waiter. "Three ladies and two gentlemen."

He was conducting her obsequiously across the room as he spoke, and a moment later he opened the door of the salon and stood aside to let her pass in.

A little well-bred clamour ensued upon her entrance; greetings, questions and answers as between acquaintances who had not met for some time, and met now with a pleasure which seemed rather part and parcel of the gaiety to which the atmosphere of the dining-room had witnessed than an affair of the feelings. All Mrs. Romaine's five visitors were apparently under five-and-thirty, the eldest being a man of perhaps three or four-and-thirty, addressed by Mrs. Romaine as Lord Cloughton; the youngest a pretty girl who was introduced by the leader of the party, presumably Lady Cloughton, herself quite a young woman, as "my little sister." They were all well-dressed; they were all apparently in the best possible spirits, and bent upon enjoyment; and gay little laughs interspersed the chatter, incessantly breaking from one or the other on little or no apparent provocation. Eventually Lady Cloughton's voice detached itself and went on alone.

"We heard you were here," she said, "from a man who is staying here. We are at the Français, you know. And we said at once, 'Supposing Mrs. Romaine is not engaged for to-morrow'—so many people don't come, you see, until the day before the carnival, and consequently, of course, one has fewer friends and fewer engagements, and this week is not so full, don't you know—'supposing she has no engagement for to-morrow,' we said, 'how pleasant it would be if she would come with us to La Turbie.' We have to make Mr. Romaine's acquaintance, you know. So charmed to have the opportunity! I hope he is well?"

"Fairly well, thanks," replied his wife. "He has been in London all the winter—his business always seems to take him *to the wrong* place at the wrong time—and either the climate

or his work seems to have knocked him up a little. He seems to have got into a shocking habit of sitting up all night and staying in bed all day. At least he has acted on that principle during the week we have been together. He is actually not up yet."

Mrs. Romaine smiled as she spoke; her husband's "shocking habits" apparently sat very lightly on her; in fact, there was something singularly disengaged and impersonal in her manner of speaking of him, altogether. Her visitor received her smile with a pretty little unmeaning laugh, and went on with much superficial eagerness:

"He may, perhaps, be up in time for our expedition, though! We thought of starting in about two hours' time. They say the place is perfectly beautiful at this time of year. Perhaps you know it."

"No," returned Mrs. Romaine. "Oddly enough I have never been to Nice before. I have often talked of wintering here, but I have always eventually gone somewhere else! Are you here for the first time?" she added, turning to the young man, whom she had received as Mr. Allan, and who evidently occupied the position of mutual acquaintance between herself and her other visitors. He was answering her in the affirmative when Lord Cloughton struck in with a cheery laugh.

"He's been here two days, and he has come to the conclusion that Nice is a beastly hole, Mrs. Romaine!" he said. "This afternoon's expedition is really a device on our part for cheering him up. He let himself be persuaded into putting some money into a new bank, and the new bank has smashed. Have you seen the papers? Now, Allan hasn't lost much, fortunately; it isn't that that weighs upon him. But he is oppressed by a sense of his own imbecility, aren't you, old fellow?"

The young man laughed, freely enough.

"Perhaps I am," he said. "So would you be, Cloughton, wouldn't he, Mrs. Romaine? And don't tell me you wouldn't have done the same, because any fellow would, in my place. However, if Mrs. Romaine is more likely to join us this afternoon if the proceedings are presented to her in the light of a charity, I'm quite willing to pose as an object! Take pity on me, Mrs. Romaine, do!"

"I shan't pity you," answered Mrs. Romaine lightly. "You don't seem to me to be much depressed, and your misfortunes appear to be of your own making. But I shall be delighted to



go with you this afternoon," she continued, turning to Lady Cloughton. "And I feel sure that Mr. Romaine will also be delighted."

"That is quite charming of you!" exclaimed Lady Cloughton, rising as she spoke. "Well, then, I think if we were to call for you—yes, we will call for you in two hours from now. So glad you can come! The little boy quite well? So glad. In two hours, then! Au revoir."

There was a flutter of departure, a chorus of bright, meaningless, last words, and Mrs. Romaine stood at the head of the great staircase, waving her hand in farewell as her visitors, with a last backward glance and parting smiles and gestures, disappeared from view. She stood a moment watching some people in the hall below, whose appearance had struck her at dinner on the previous evening, and as she looked idly at them she saw a man come in—an Englishman, evidently just off a journey, and "not a gentleman" as she decided absently—and go up to a waiter who was standing in the dining-room doorway. The Englishman evidently asked a question and then another and another, and finally the waiter glanced up the stairs to where Mrs. Romaine stood carelessly watching, and obviously pointed her out to his interlocutor, asking a question in his turn. The Englishman, after looking quickly in Mrs. Romaine's direction, shook his head in answer and walked into the dining-room.

With a vague feeling of surprise and curiosity Mrs. Romaine turned and moved away. She retraced her steps, evidently intending to go upstairs, but as she passed the open door of the drawing-room she hesitated; her eyes caught by the bright prospect visible through the open windows which looked out over the public gardens and the blue Mediterranean; her ears caught by the sounds from the band still playing outside. She re-entered the room, crossed to the window and stood there, looking out with inattentive pleasure, the dialogue she had witnessed in the hall quite forgotten as she thought of her own affairs. She thought of the immediate prospects of the next few weeks; wholly satisfactory prospects they were, to judge from her expression. She thought of the letters she had received that morning, mentally answering the invitations she had received. She thought of the acquaintances who had just left her, and of the engagement she had made for that afternoon; and then, as if the necessity for seeing her husband on the

subject had by this means become freshly present to her, she turned away from the window and went out of the room and up the staircase. On her way she chanced to glance down into the hall and noticed the Englishman to whom the waiter had pointed her out, leaning in a reposeful and eminently stationary attitude against the entrance. She would ask who he was, she resolved idly. She went on until she came to a door at the end of a long corridor, outside which stood a dainty little pair of walking shoes and a pair of man's boots. She glanced at them and lifted her eyebrows slightly—a characteristic gesture—and then opened the door.

It led into a little dressing-room, from which another doorway on the left led, evidently, into a larger room beyond. The glimpse of the latter afforded by the partly open door showed it dim and dark by contrast with the light outside; apparently the blind was but slightly raised. There was no sunshine in the dressing-room, either, though it was light enough; and as Mrs. Romaine went in and shut the door she seemed to pass into a silence that was almost oppressive. The band, the strains of which had reached her at the very threshold, was not audible in the room; in shutting the door she seemed to shut out all external sounds, and within the room was absolute stillness.

The contrast, however, made no impression whatever upon Mrs. Romaine. She was by no means sensitive, evidently, to such subtle influence. She glanced carelessly through the doorway into the dim vista of the bedroom beyond, and going to the other end of the dressing-room knelt down by a portmanteau, and began to search in it with the uncertainty of a woman whose packing is done for her by a maid. She found what she wanted; sundry dainty adjuncts to out-of-door attire, one of which, a large lace sunshade, required a little attention. She took up an elaborate little case for work implements that lay on the table, and selected a needle and thread, and a thimble; and perhaps the dead silence about her oppressed her a little, unconsciously to herself, for she hummed as she did so a bar or two of the waltz she had shut out as she shut the door. Then with the needle moving deftly to and fro in her white, well-shaped hands, she moved down the dressing-room, and standing in the light for the sake of her work, she spoke through the doorway into the still, dark bedroom.

"The Cloughtons have been here, William," she said.

"The people I met in Rome this winter ; I think I told you, didn't I? They wanted us to go to La Turbie with them this afternoon, and I said we would. That is to say, I only answered conditionally for you, of course. Will you go?"

There was no answer, no sound of any kind. Not so much as a stir or a rustle to indicate that the sleep of the man hidden in the dimness beyond—and only sleep surely could account for his silence—was even broken by the words addressed to him. Yet the voice which proceeded from the serene, well-appointed little figure standing in the sombre light of the dressing-room, with its attention more or less given to the trivial work in its hands, was penetrating in its quality, though not loud.

Mrs. Romaine paused a moment, listening. Then, with that expressive movement of her eyebrows, she went back again to the dressing-table she had left, took up a little pair of scissors which were necessary to give the finishing touch to her work, gave that finishing touch with careless deliberation, studied the effect with satisfaction, and then laid down the sunshade, and returned to the doorway into the bedroom. She stood on the threshold this time, and the darkness before her and the sombre light behind her seemed to meet upon her figure ; the silence and stillness all about her seemed to claim even the space she occupied.

"William !" she said crisply. "William !"

Again there was no answer ; no sound or stir of any sort or kind. And for the first time the silence seemed to strike her. She moved quickly forward into the dimness.

"William ! Are you asleep——"

Her eyes had fallen on the bed, and she stopped suddenly. For it was empty. She paused an instant, and in that instant the silence seemed to rise and dominate the atmosphere as with a grim and mighty presence, before which everything shallow or superficial sank into insignificance. All that was typical and conventional about the woman standing in the midst of the stillness, arrested by she knew not what, suddenly seemed to stand out jarring and incongruous, as though unreality had been met and touched into self-revelation by a great reality. Then it subsided altogether, and only the simplest elements of womanhood were left—the womanhood common to the peasant and the princess—as the wife took two or three quick steps forward. She turned the corner of the bed that hid the greater

part of the room from her, and then staggered back with a sharp cry. At her feet, partly dressed, there lay the figure of the man to whom she had been talking; his right hand, dropped straight by his side, clenched a revolver; his face—a handsome face probably an hour ago—was white and fixed; his eyes were glassy. On the floor beside him lay an open letter—a letter written on blue paper.

William Romaine was asleep indeed. His wife might tear at the bell-rope; the hotel servants might hurry and rush to and fro; even the recently-arrived Englishman might render his assistance. But it was all in vain. William Romaine was beyond their reach.

## CHAPTER II

THE long railway journey from Paris to Nice was nearly over. The passengers, jaded and tired out, for the most part, after a night in the train, were beginning to rouse to a languid interest in the landscape; to become aware that dawn and the uncomfortable and unfamiliar early day had some time since given place to a fuller and maturer light; and to consult their watches, reminding themselves—or one another, as the case might be—that they were due at Nice at twelve-fifteen.

Alone in one of the first-class carriages was a passenger who had accepted the situation with the most matter-of-fact indifference from first to last. He had made his arrangements for the night, with the skill and deliberation of an experienced traveller; and as the morning advanced he had composed himself, as comfortably as circumstances permitted, in a corner of his carriage, now and then casting a keen, comprehensive glance at the country through which he was being carried. These glances, however, were evidently instinctive and almost unconscious. For the most part he gazed straight before him with a preoccupied frown and a grave and anxious expression in marked contrast with his physical imperturbability. He was a man of apparently three or four-and-thirty; tall; rather lean than thin; and very muscular-looking. His face, and the right hand from which he had pulled off the glove, were bronzed a deep red-brown, and he wore a long brown beard; but he was not otherwise remarkable-looking. His eyes, indeed, were very keen and steady, but the rest of his face conveyed the impression that he owed these characteristics rather to trained habits of material observation than to general intellectual depths; the mouth was firm and strong, but neither sensitive nor sympathetic, and the straight, well-cut nose was as distinctly too thin as the rather high forehead was too narrow. On a much-worn travelling-bag on the seat beside him, was the name Dennis Falconer.

The train steamed slowly into the station at Nice at last; the traveller stepped out on to the platform, and the shade

of grave preoccupation which had touched him seemed to descend on him more heavily and all-absorbingly as he did so. He was walking down the platform, looking neither to the right nor the left, when he was stopped by a quick exclamation from a little wiry man with a shrewd, clever face, who had just come into the station.

"Falconer, as I'm alive," he cried. "Well met, my boy!"

The gravity of the younger man's face relaxed for the moment into a smile of well-pleased astonishment.

"Dr. Aston!" he exclaimed. "Why, I was thinking of looking you up in London! I'd no idea you were abroad!"

The other man laughed, a very pleasant, jovial laugh.

"I'm taking a holiday," he said. "I don't know that I've any particular right to it! But I don't know these places, and I took it into my head that I should like to have a look at a carnival in Nice. And you, my boy? Just back from Africa, you are, I know. You've come for the carnival by way of a change, eh?"

Falconer's face altered.

"No!" he said gravely, and with a good deal of restraint. "I've not come for pleasure. Very much the reverse, I'm sorry to say."

He paused, apparently intending to say no more on the subject. But the keen, kindly interest in his hearer's face, or something magnetic about the man, influenced him in spite of himself.

"I don't know whether the facts about this bank business are known here yet," he said, "but if they are you'll understand, Aston, when I tell you that I and my old uncle are the only male relations of William Romaine's wife."

A quick flash of grave intelligence passed across Dr. Aston's face. He hesitated and glanced dubiously at the younger man.

"When did you leave London?" he said abruptly.

"Yesterday morning," was the somewhat surprised reply.

"You've come in good time, my boy," said Dr. Aston very gravely. "Mrs. Romaine wants a relation with her if ever she did in her life. Was her husband ever a friend of yours, Dennis?"

"I have never met him. I know very little even of his wife. What is it, doctor?"

"William Romaine shot himself yesterday morning!"

B

A short, sharp exclamation broke from Falconer, and then there was a moment's total silence between the two men as the sudden, unspeakable horror in Falconer's face resolved itself into a shocked, almost awestruck gravity.

"I am thankful to have met you," he said at last in a low, stern voice; "and I am more than thankful that I came."

He held out his hand as he spoke, as though what he had heard impelled him to go on his way, and Dr. Aston wrung it with warm sympathy.

"We shall meet again," he said. "Let me know if I can be of any use. I am staying at the Français."

Grave and stern, but not apparently shaken or rendered nervous by the news he had heard, or by the prospect of the meeting before him, as a sympathetic or emotional man must have been, Dennis Falconer strode out of the station. Grave and stern he reached his destination, and enquired for Mrs. Romaine. His question was answered by the proprietor himself, supplemented by half-audible ejaculations from attendant waiters, in a tone in which sympathetic interest, familiarity, and even a certain amount of resentment were inextricably blended.

Monsieur would see Madame Romaine—*cette pauvre madame*, of a demeanour so beautiful, yes, even in these frightful circumstances; so beautiful and so distinguished? Monsieur had but just arrived from England—monsieur had then perhaps not heard? Monsieur was aware? He was a kinsman of madame? Monsieur would then doubtless appreciate the so great inconvenience occasioned, the hardly to-be-reckoned damage sustained by one of the first hotels in Nice, by the event? Monsieur would see madame at once? But yes, madame was visible. There was, in fact, a monsieur with her even now—an English monsieur from the English Scotland Yard. Madame had sent—— But monsieur was indeed in haste.

Monsieur left no possibility of doubt on that score. The waiter, told off by a wave of the proprietor's hand on the vigorous demonstration to that effect evoked by the mention of the monsieur from Scotland Yard, had to hasten his usual pace considerably to keep ahead of those quick, firm footsteps, and it was almost breathlessly that he at last threw open a door at the end of a long corridor.

"Mr. Romaine's name is public property in connection with the affair, then, in London, since yesterday morning?"

The words, spoken in a hard, thin, woman's voice, came to Falconer's ear as the door opened ; and the waiter's announcement, "A kinsman of madame," passed unheeded as he moved hastily forward into the room.

It was a small private sitting-room, evidently by no means the best in the hotel. With his back to the door stood a young man in an attitude of professional calm, rather belied by a certain nervous fingering of the hat he held, which seemed to say that he found his position a somewhat embarrassing one. Facing him, and indirectly facing the door, stood Mrs. Romaine.

She was dressed in black from head to foot, but the gown she wore was one that she had had in her wardrobe—very fashionably made, with no trace of mourning about it other than its hue.

Emphasized, perhaps, by the incongruity of her conventional smartness, but a result of the past twenty-four hours independent of any such emphasis, all the more salient points of her demeanour of the day before seemed to be accentuated into hardness. Her perfect self-possession, as she faced the young man before her—it was the man she had noticed on the previous morning questioning the waiter—was hard ; her perfect freedom from any touch of emotion or agitation was hard ; her face, a little sharpened and haggard, and reddened slightly about the eyelids, apparently rather from want of sleep than from tears, was very hard ; her eyes, brighter than usual, and her rather thin mouth, were eloquent of bitterness, rather than desolation, of spirit.

She turned quickly towards the door as Falconer entered, and looked at him for an instant with an unrecognising stare. Then, as he advanced to her without speaking, and with outstretched hand, something that was almost a spasm of comprehension passed across her face, settling into a stiff little society smile.

"It is Dennis Falconer, isn't it?" she said, holding out her hand to him. "I ought to have known you at once. I am very glad to see you."

"My uncle thought—— We decided yesterday morning——"

Dennis Falconer hesitated and stopped. He was thrown out of his reckoning, taken hopelessly aback, as it were, by something so entirely unlike what he had expected as was her



whole bearing ; though, indeed, he had been quite unconscious of expecting anything. But Mrs. Romaine remained completely mistress of the situation.

"It is very kind of you," she said, with the same hard composure. "It is very kind of my uncle." She hesitated, hardly perceptibly, and then said, the lines about her mouth growing more bitter, "You have heard?"

Falconer bowed his head in assent, and she turned toward the young man, who had drawn a little apart during this colloquy.

"This gentleman comes from Scotland Yard," she said. "Perhaps you will be so kind as to go into matters with him. I do not understand business or legal details. Mr. Falconer will represent me," she added to the young man, who bowed with an alacrity that suggested, as did his glance at Falconer, that the prospect of conferring with a man rather than a woman was a distinct relief to him. Then, before Falconer's not very rapid mind had adjusted itself to the situation, she had bowed slightly to the young man and left the room.

### CHAPTER III

THREE days before, the name of William Romaine had been widely known and respected throughout Europe as the name of a successful and distinguished financier. Now, it was the centre of a nine-days' wonder as the name of a master swindler, detected.

A bank, established in London within the last twelve months in connection with a company offering an exceptionally high rate of interest, had suddenly suspended payment. The circumstances were so ordinary, and the explanation offered so plausible, that at first no suspicion of underhand dealings presented itself. It was in connection with the first whispers—which ran like wildfire through financial London—of something beneath the surface, that it first became known that William Romaine had some connection, as yet undefined by rumour, with the bank in question; a fact hitherto quite unknown. The whispers grew with rapidity which was almost incredible even to the whisperers, into a definite and authentic shout of accusation; and with the exposure of an outline of such daring and ingenious fraud as had not been perpetrated for many a day, another fact had become public property. The exposure had been brought about by an incredibly short-sighted blunder on the part of the master mind by which the whole affair had been conceived. William Romaine's was the master mind, and William Romaine, in trying to overreach alike his dupes and his confederates, had overreached himself. His own hand had created the clue which had led eventually to the ruin of the scheme he had originated. His death, with the news of which the London Stock Exchange was ringing only a few hours after it was known in Nice, was the forfeit paid by a strong nature to which success in all its undertakings was the very salt of life.

Mrs. Romaine, on leaving the sitting-room, passed along the passages to her own room—not that which she had entered twenty-four hours before to consult with her husband as to the pleasure expedition of the afternoon—her face and

manner altering not at all. Her composure was evidently neither forced nor unreal. The emotion created in her by the tragic circumstances through which she was living was obviously not the heart-broken shame and despair naturally to be attributed to a wife so situated, but a bitter and burning resentment. Had William Romaine passed away in the ordinary course of nature, or by any violent accident, his widow would have mourned him with conventional lamentation and with a certain amount of genuine regret. He had committed suicide, as the letter lying by his side revealed to his wife even while she hardly realised that he was indeed dead, as his only way of escape from the consequences of fraud on the brink of detection ; and his widow's attitude to his memory under these circumstances was the natural outcome of the character of their married life.

Hermia Stirling at nineteen had been a pretty, practical, matter-of-fact girl, with her rather shallow nature somewhat prematurely matured. She had been an orphan from her babyhood, and having no near relations in England, her nineteen years of life had been lived under varied auspices, resulting in more desultory education, moral as well as mental, than was good for her. The most impressionable of those years, however—those from fourteen to nineteen—had been passed with connections of her mother's, young and wealthy society women, with no ideas beyond society life, and with little perceptible principle but that of social expediency. Hermia was just nineteen, just out, and taking to the life before her with the ease and zest of a born woman of the world, when one of these ladies died, and the other married and went away to America with her husband. At this juncture the girl's guardian, her father's only brother, returned from India to settle in London with his only child, a girl two years older than Hermia ; and it was obvious that his home must be also Hermia's. But neither old Mr. Falconer nor his daughter had the slightest taste or capacity for fashionable life, and before she had spent six months with them the world had become to Hermia an insufferably dull and tiresome place.

She had known William Romaine in society. He was rich, he was handsome, and he was very popular ; there was that indefinable something about him, manner, magnetism, or tact, which constitutes a kind of dominating charm. He was not the less "somebody" in that he was vaguely understood

to be a business man of some sort, with dealings in shares and stocks all over the world—a locality which lent a picturesque haziness to his affairs. Consequently, when he followed Hermia into her new life and asked her to marry him, she passed over the fact that he was five-and-twenty years her senior, and consented with the practical promptitude of a nature for which romance and sentiment were not. For eighteen months she and her husband had lived in a large house in Eaton Square, entertaining and being entertained through two brilliant seasons, which took away any girlishness which Hermia had ever possessed, and gave her qualities which she admired infinitely more. She found her husband very pleasant, very easy to live with, and, after the first six months, quite un-exacting. His business took him into the City every day at this time, though, as his wife said, complacently, he was not the least like the ordinary City man; but at the end of the season which followed on the birth of their child he announced that he would have to spend certainly six months, possibly more, in America.

He showed no ardent desire to take his wife with him, and his wife had no desire whatever to go. She wanted to spend the rest of the summer at one of the fashionable health resorts, and to winter in Rome. Such an arrangement was accordingly made between them in the simplest, most matter-of-fact way, arguing no shadow of ill-will on either side; and during the four years which had elapsed since then, husband and wife had each gone his or her own way, meeting when occasion served for a month or two at a time, now in London, now in Paris, now in Rome; and presumably finding the arrangement mutually satisfactory. The little boy had been left for the most part to the care of Mrs. Romaine's cousin, Frances Falconer. Mrs. Romaine regarded him with the careless, half-dormant affection of a woman to whom her child owes nothing but bare life; to whom its arrival in the world has been rather a tiresome interlude, merely, in her round of pleasures and pursuits; who has had no time since, and has seen no occasion to make time, to give it that care which other people, as it seemed to her, could give it quite as well as she; and who is waiting, vaguely, until it shall be "grown up," to find it interesting.

That her husband's "business" had taken him in the course of those four years into every corner of the globe where

the passing of money from hand to hand is elevated into a science, Mrs. Romaine knew; and with that fact her knowledge of his affairs began and ended. He made her an ample allowance; whenever they met she found him the same handsome, rather callous, but withal fascinating man; clever with a cleverness which she could appreciate—the cleverness which made money, and held a position in society—and she had asked nothing more of him. Her regard for him, if regard that could be called which was more truly indifference, had been founded on appreciation of his success. Before failure, before the social disgrace which must be the lot of a detected swindler and suicide, it disappeared totally and instantaneously, to be replaced by a burning sense of personal outrage and insult.

It was late in the afternoon before she left her room again. Dennis Falconer received a message to the effect that Mrs. Romaine was sure that he must be tired, and begged that he would not think of her until he had lunched and rested.

When she did reappear she was in widow's weeds, and the contrast between her dress, with its tragic significance of desolation, and her face, untouched with feeling, was inexpressible.

Dennis Falconer was in the sitting-room when she entered it. His sense of duty was largely developed, and he was also keenly sensible of the moral aspect of the affair with which he was brought into such close contact. The first of these senses kept him in waiting in anticipation of the appearance of the woman for whose assistance he was there; and the second weighed so heavily upon him that the publicity of the hotel smoking-room would have been intolerable to him under the circumstances.

He rose quickly as Mrs. Romaine came in, a look of slight constraint on his face.

Dennis Falconer had no near relation, and perhaps this absence of close ties to England had had something to do with his adoption of the life of a traveller and explorer in connection with the Royal Geographical Society. Old Mr. Falconer, Mrs. Romaine's uncle, was his second cousin only, though the younger man had been brought up to address him as uncle; but in so small a clan distant relationship counts for more than in a family where first cousins and brothers and sisters abound, and there was nothing strange to Dennis Falconer or to Mrs. Romaine in the fact of his coming to her support, even though they hardly knew one another. But

Falconer had been chilled and even repelled by her manner of the morning, and he was very conscious now of having his cousin's acquaintance to make, and of approaching the process with a vague prejudice against her in his mind.

This prejudice was not dissipated by her first words, spoken with a suavity somewhat low in pitch, truly, but with a tacit ignoring of the significance of their meeting which seemed to the man she addressed—to whom society life with its obligations and conventionalities was practically an unknown quantity—simply jarring and unsuitable.

"I hope you are rested!" she said. "I suppose, though, that to such a traveller as you are, the journey from London to Nice is nothing. I hear from Frances constantly about your exploits, and she tells me that we are to expect great things of you. What a long time it is since we met!"

She sat down as she spoke, with a hard little smile, and Falconer murmured something almost unintelligible. Thinking that his manner arose from mere embarrassment, instinct dictated to her to set him at his ease; and with no faintest comprehension of his attitude of mind she proceeded to chat to him about his own affairs, asking him questions which elicited coherent answers indeed, but answers which grew terser and sterner until she thought indifferently that her cousin was a rather heavy person. At last there came a pause; a pause during which Falconer gazed grimly and uncomfortably at the floor. And when Mrs. Romaine broke it, it was with a different tone and manner, hard and matter-of-fact.

"The detective told you more than he told me, possibly," she said. "If there is anything more for me to hear, I should like to hear it. You had better, I think, read this letter. Mr. Romaine received it yesterday morning."

She handed him that letter written on blue paper which had lain by the dead man's side, and Falconer took it in silence.

The letter was from one of William Romaine's confederates. It was the desperate letter of a desperate man who knew himself to be addressing the man to whom he was to owe ruin and disgrace. The crisis had evidently been so wholly unexpected that detection was actually imminent before the criminals recognised it as even possible. The gist of the letter was contained in the statement that before it met the eyes of the man for whom it was intended, the whole scheme would be exploded.

Falconer read it through, his face very stern. He finished it and refolded it, still in silence, and Mrs. Romaine said in a dry, thin voice :

"It bears out, as you see, what the detective no doubt told you—that there was so little ground for suspicion three days ago that he was sent out merely to watch, and without even a warrant. He found a telegram waiting for him here from his authorities yesterday morning."

"He told me so!" answered Falconer distantly and constrainedly, handing her back the letter as he spoke without comment.

"There is not the faintest possibility of hushing it up, I conclude?" she asked, in the same hard voice.

Falconer looked at her for a moment, the indefinite disapprobation of her, which had been growing in him almost with every word she said, taking form in his face in a distinct expression of reprobation.

"Not the faintest!" he said emphatically. "Nor do I see that such a possibility is in any way to be desired."

She glanced at him with a quick movement of her eyebrows. She did not speak, however, and a silence ensued between them; one of those uncomfortable silences eloquent of conscious want of sympathy. It was broken this time by Falconer, who spoke with formal politeness and restraint.

"You will wish to get away from this place as soon as possible, no doubt," he said. "There may be some slight delay before we are put into possession of the papers and other effects at present in the hands of the authorities here. But I will, of course, do all I can to hasten matters."

"Thanks!" she said. "The papers? Oh, you mean Mr. Romaine's papers! Are there any, do you think? A will, I suppose?"

"The will, if there is one, will be so much waste paper, I fear," said Falconer with uncompromising sternness. "There is no chance of any property being saved, even if it was possible to wish for such a thing. But there may be papers, nevertheless; in fact, no doubt there must be; and you will, of course, wish to have them."

"Yes," said Mrs. Romaine thoughtfully; "yes, of course." She paused a moment, and then added in a dry, constrained voice: "Do you mean me to understand that I am absolutely penniless?"

"Was your own money in your own hands, or in Mr. Romaine's?"

"In Mr. Romaine's."

"Then I fear there can be no doubt that such is the case."

Falconer spoke very stiffly and distantly, and Mrs. Romaine rose from her chair a little abruptly, and walked to the window. When she turned to him again it was to speak of the formalities necessary with the Nice authorities, and a few moments later the interview was ended by the appearance of dinner.

During the few days that followed, the distance between them, which that first interview established so imperceptibly but so certainly, never lessened; it grew, indeed, with their contact with one another.

To Falconer Mrs. Romaine's whole attitude of mind, her whole personality, was simply and entirely antipathetic. That a woman under such circumstances should speak, and act, and think as Mrs. Romaine spoke, and acted, and—as far as he could tell—thought; with so little sense of any but the social aspect of her husband's crime; with so little realisation of the ruin that crime had brought to hundreds of innocent people; with so little moral feeling of any kind; was in the highest degree reprehensible to him. Having assumed a mental attitude of reprehension, he stopped short; his perceptions were not sufficiently keen to allow of his understanding that some pity might be due also.

Suffering is not always to be estimated by the worth of the object through which it is inflicted; not often, indeed, in this world, where the sum of man's suffering is out of all proportion greater than the sum of man's spirituality. Mrs. Romaine's conception of life might be in the last degree narrow and selfish, and as such it might be in the highest degree to be deprecated; but such as it was it was all she had, and within its limits her life was now in ruin. Her aims and ends in life might be of the poorest, and deserving of unsparing condemnation; but she had nothing beyond, and the pain of their overthrow was to her dormant sensibility not so very disproportionate to the suffering inflicted on a more sensitive organisation by the shattering of higher hopes.

Mrs. Romaine, for her part, found her cousin, with the reserve and formality of demeanour which the situation developed in him, simply a tiresome and uncongenial companion.



He was very attentive to her. His manner, as she acknowledged to herself more than once with a heavy sigh, was excellent, and he managed her difficult and painful affairs with admirable strength and tact; she learnt in the course of those few days to respect him and depend on him, in spite of herself and even against her will. But it was not surprising that the end of their enforced dual solitude should be looked for more or less eagerly by both parties. They were almost entirely dependent on one another for companionship. Falconer, it is true, saw Dr. Aston once or twice; but of Mrs. Romaine's acquaintances not one had even left a card of condolence upon her. Neither the Cloughtons nor any other of the pleasure-seekers who had previously been so anxious for her society, showed any sign of being aware of her existence under her present circumstances.

The form taken by Falconer's first allusion to the probable limits of their detention in Nice had created in both of them, by one of those vague chains of idea which are so unaccountable and so often experienced, a tendency to think and speak of the termination of that detention, when they did speak together on the subject, as "when the papers are given up." There was some question, at one time, as to whether or no even the private papers of William Romaine would be returned to his widow. And these same papers, thus surrounded by an element of painful uncertainty, and at the same time elevated into a kind of order of release, obtained in the minds of both a fictitious importance on their own account. Mrs. Romaine found herself thinking about them, conjecturing about them, even dreaming about them; until at last, when they were actually placed in her hand, they possessed a curious fascination for her.

It was about midday when she and Falconer returned from their final appearance before the authorities. She stood in the middle of the room holding the large, shabby despatch-box, lately handed to her with a grave "Private papers, madame"; the noise of the carnival floated in at the window in striking contrast with the two sombre figures.

"I think I will go and look them over!" she said in a low, rather surprised voice. "You would like to go out, perhaps. Please don't think about me. I will spend the day quietly indoors."

He answered her courteously, and she left the room slowly, with her eyes fixed curiously on the despatch-box in her hand.

## CHAPTER IV

MRS. ROMAYNE carried the despatch-box to her bedroom and set it down on a small table. She and Falconer were leaving Nice on the following morning, and her maid was just finishing her packing. Mrs. Romaine inspected the woman's arrangements, gave her sundry orders, and then dismissed her. Left alone, she made one or two trifling preparations for the journey on her own account, and when these were completed to her satisfaction, she drew the table on which she had placed the despatch-box to the open window, and seated herself.

She drew the box towards her and unlocked it, and there was nothing in her face as she did so but the hard resentment which had grown upon it during the last few days, just touched by an indefinite and equally hard curiosity. The interest which those papers possessed for her had been created by purely artificial means ; intrinsically they were nothing to her. The position which the possession of them had occupied in her thoughts lately was the sole source of the impulse under which she was acting now ; under any other circumstances she might hardly have cared to look at them.

She raised the lid and paused a moment, looking down at the compact mass of papers within with a sudden vague touch of more personal interest. The box was nearly full. The various sets of papers were carefully and methodically fastened together, and endorsed evidently upon a system. Mrs. Romaine hesitated a moment, and then took out a packet at random.

It consisted of bills all bearing dates within the last six months ; all sent in by leading London tradesmen, and all for large amounts. Mrs. Romaine glanced at the figures, and her eyebrows moved with an expression of slight surprise, which was almost immediately dominated by bitter acceptance and comprehension. She opened none, however, until she came to one bearing the name of a well-known London jeweller. She read the name and the amount of the bill, and paused ; then a new curiosity came into her eyes, and she unfolded the

paper quickly. The account was a very long one, and as her eyes travelled quickly down it, taking in item after item, a dull red colour crept into her face, and her eyes sparkled with contemptuous resentment. She was evidently surprised, and yet half-annoyed with herself for being surprised. Two-thirds of the items in the bill in her hand were for articles of jewellery not worn by men, and not one of these had ever been seen by William Romaine's wife.

She stuffed the paper back into its fastening, tossed the bundle away and took another packet from the box with quickened interest. It consisted of miscellaneous documents, all, likewise, connected with her husband's life in London during the past winter, but of no particular interest. The next packet she opened was of the same nature, and with that the top layer of the box came to an end.

The papers below were evidently older; of varying ages, indeed, to judge from their varying tints of yellow. Disarranging a lower layer in taking out the packet nearest to her hand, Mrs. Romaine saw that there were older papers still, beneath, and realised that the box before her contained the private papers of many years; probably all the private papers which William Romaine had preserved throughout his life. She opened the packet she had drawn out, hastily and with an angry glitter in her eyes. It consisted of businesslike-looking documents not likely, as it seemed, to be of any interest to her.

She glanced through the first unheedingly enough, and then, as she reached the end, something seemed suddenly to touch her attention. She paused a moment, with a startled, incredulous expression on her face, and began to re-read it slowly and carefully. She read it to the end again, and her face, as she finished, was a little pale and chilled-looking. She freed another paper from the packet almost mechanically, with an absorbed, preoccupied look in her eyes, opened it and read it with a strained, hardly comprehending attention which grew gradually and imperceptibly, as she went on from paper to paper, into a kind of stupefied horror. She finished the thick packet in her hands, and then she paused, lifting her pale face for a moment and gazing straight before her with an indescribable expression on its shallow hardness, as though she was realising something almost incredibly bitter and repugnant to her, and was stunned by the realisation. Then her instincts and habits of life and thought seemed to

assert themselves, as it were, and to dominate the situation. Her expression changed; the stupefied look gave place to what was little deeper than bitter excitement; a patch of angry colour succeeded the pallor of a moment earlier; and her eyes glittered.

Turning to the despatch-box again, she proceeded to ransack it with a hasty eagerness of touch which differed markedly from the careless composure of her earlier proceedings. Paper after paper was torn open, glanced through—sometimes even re-read with a feverish attention—and tossed aside; sometimes with a sudden deepening of that angry flush; sometimes with a movement of the lips, as though an interjection formed itself upon them; always with a heightening of her excitement; until one packet only remained at the bottom of the box. Mrs. Romaine snatched it out, and then started slightly as she saw that it did not consist, as the majority of the others had done, of business papers, but of letters in a woman's handwriting. Nor was it so old as many of the papers she had looked at, some of which had borne dates twenty-five years back. She opened it with a sudden hardening of her excitement, which seemed to mark the change from almost impersonal to intensely personal interest. She saw that the date was that of the second year after her marriage; that each letter was annotated in her husband's writing; and then she began deliberately to read, her lips very thin and set, her eyes cold and hard. She read the letters all through, with every comment inscribed on them, and by the time she laid the last upon the table her very lips were white with vindictive feeling strangely incongruous on her little conventional face. She sat quite still for a moment, and then rose abruptly and stood by the window with her back to the table, looking out upon the evening sky.

The strength of feeling died out of her face, however, in the course of a very few minutes, leaving it only very white and rather strange-looking, as though she had received a series of shocks which had made a mark even on material so difficult to impress as her artificial personality; and she turned, by-and-by, and contemplated the table, littered now with documents of all sorts, as though she saw, not the actual heaps of papers, but something beyond them contemptible and disgusting to her beyond expression. Then suddenly she moved forward, crammed the papers indiscriminately into the despatch-box,

forced down the lid, and carried the box out of the room down the stairs towards the sitting-room where she had left Dennis Falconer.

It was an impulse not wholly consistent with the self-reliance of her ordinary manner; but that manner had been acquired in a world where shocks and difficulties were more or less disbelieved in. Face to face with so unconventional a condition of affairs Mrs. Romaine's conventional instincts were necessarily at fault; and there being no strong motive power in her to supply their place, it was only natural that she should relieve herself by turning to the man on whom the past few days had taught her to rely.

Dennis Falconer was not in the sitting-room when she opened the door, but as she stood in the doorway contemplating the empty room, he came down the corridor behind her.

"Were you looking for me?" he said with distant courtesy as he reached her. He made a movement to relieve her of the box she carried, and as he did so he was struck by her expression. "Is there anything here you wish me to see?" he said quickly and gravely.

"Yes," she said; she spoke in a dry, hard voice, about which there was a ring of excitement which made him look at her again, and realise vaguely that something was wrong.

He followed her into the room, and she motioned to him to put the box on the table.

"I have been looking them over," she said, indicating the papers with a gesture, "and I have brought them to you. They are very interesting."

She laughed a bitter, crackling little laugh, and the disapproval in ambush in Dennis Falconer's expression developed a little.

"Do you wish me to go over them now, and with you?" he enquired stiffly.

"Not with me, I think, thank you," she answered, the novel excitement about her manner finding expression once more in that harsh laugh. "One reading is enough. But now, if you don't mind. There are business points on which I may possibly be mistaken"—she did not look as though she spoke from conviction—"and—I should like you to read them. I will go out into the garden; it is quite empty always at this time, and I want some air."

Her tone and the glance she cast at the despatch-box as

she spoke made it evident that it was not closeness of material atmosphere alone that had created the necessity.

"I will read them now, certainly, if you wish it," he returned.

Then, as she took up a book which lay on a table with a mechanical gesture of acknowledgement, he opened the door for her and she went out of the room. He came back to the table, drew up a chair, and opened the despatch-box.

Two hours later Dennis Falconer was still sitting in that same chair, his right hand, which rested on the table, clenched until the knuckles were white, his face pale to the very lips beneath its tan. In his eyes, fixed in a kind of dreadful fascination on the innocent-looking piles of papers before him, there was a look of shocked, almost incredulous horror, which seemed to touch all that was narrow and dogmatic about his ordinary expression into something deep and almost solemn. The door opened, and he started painfully. It was only the waiter with preliminary preparations for dinner, and recovering himself with an effort Falconer rose, and slowly, almost as though their very touch was repugnant to him, began to replace the papers in the box. He locked it, and then left the room, carrying it with him.

Dinner was served, and Mrs. Romaine had been waiting some two or three minutes before he reappeared. He was still pale, and the horror had rather settled down on to his face than left it; but it had changed its character somewhat; the breadth was gone from it. It was as though he had passed through a moment of expansion and insight to contract again to his ordinary limits. Mrs. Romaine was standing near the window; the excitement had almost entirely subsided from her manner, leaving her only harder and more bitter in expression than she had been three hours before. She glanced sharply at Falconer as he came towards her with a constrained, conventional word or two of apology; answered him with the words his speech demanded; and they sat down to dinner.

It was a silent meal. Mrs. Romaine made two or three remarks on general topics, and asked one or two questions as to their journey of the following day; and Falconer responded as briefly as courtesy allowed. On his own account he originated no observation whatever until dinner was over, and the final disappearance of the waiter had been succeeded by a total silence.

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Mrs. Romaine was still sitting opposite him, one elbow resting on the table, her head leaning on her hand as she absently played with some grapes on which her eyes were fixed. Falconer glanced across at her once or twice, evidently with a growing conviction that it was incumbent on him to speak, and with a growing uncertainty as to what he should say. This latter condition of things helped to make his tone even unusually formal and dogmatic as he said at last :

"Sympathy, I fear, must seem almost a farce !"

She glanced up quickly, her eyes very bright and hard.

"Sympathy?" she said drily. "I don't know that there is any new call for sympathy, is there? After all, things are very much where they were!"

A kind of shock passed across Falconer's face ; a materialisation of a mental process.

"What we know now——" he began stiffly.

"What we knew before was quite enough!" interrupted Mrs. Romaine. "When one has arrived violently at the foot of the precipice, it is of no particular moment how long one has been living on the precipice's edge. While nothing was known, Mr. Romaine was only on the precipice's edge, and as no one knew of the precipice it was practically as though none existed. Directly one thing came out it was all over! He was over the edge. Nothing could make it either better or worse."

She spoke almost carelessly, though very bitterly, as though she felt her words to be almost truisms, and Falconer stared at her for a moment in silence. Then he said with stern formality, as though he were making a deliberate effort to realise her point of view :

"You imply that Mr. Romaine's fall—his going over the edge of the precipice, if I may adopt your figure—consisted in the discovery of his misdeeds. Do you mean that you think it would have been better if nothing had ever been known?"

Mrs. Romaine raised her eyebrows.

"Of course!" she said amazedly. Then catching sight of her cousin's face she shrugged her shoulders with a little gesture of deprecating concession. "Oh, of course, I don't mean that Mr. Romaine himself would have been any better if nothing had ever come out," she said impatiently. "The right and wrong and all that kind of thing would have been

the same, I suppose. But I don't see how ruin and suicide improve the position."

She rose as she spoke, and Falconer made no answer.

Mrs. Romaine had touched on the great realities of life, the everlasting mystery of the spirit of man with its unfathomable obligations and disabilities; had touched on them carelessly, patronisingly, as "all that kind of thing." She was as absolutely blind to the depth of their significance as is a man without eyesight to the illimitable spaces of the sky above him. To Falconer her tone was simply scandalising. He did not understand her ignorance. He could not touch the pathos of its limitations and the possibilities by which it was surrounded. The grim irony of such a tone as used by the ephemeral of the immutable was beyond his ken.

"I have several things to see to upstairs," Mrs. Romaine went on after a moment's pause. "I shall go up now, and I think, if you will excuse me, I will not come down again. We start so early. Good night!"

"Good night!" he returned stiffly; and with a little superior, contemptuous smile on her face she went away.



## CHAPTER V

DENNIS FALCONER had been alone for nearly an hour, when his solitude was broken up by the appearance of a waiter, who presented him with a card, and the information that the gentleman whose name it bore was in the smoking-room. The name was Dr. Aston's, and after a moment's reflection Falconer told the waiter to ask the gentleman to come upstairs. Falconer had spent that last hour in meditation, which had grown steadily deeper and graver. It seemed to have carried him beyond the formal and dogmatic attitude of mind with which he had met Mrs. Romaine, back to the borders of those larger regions he had touched when he sat looking at William Romaine's papers; and there was a warmth and gratitude in his reception of Dr. Aston when that gentleman appeared, that suggested that he was not so completely sufficient for himself as usual.

"The smoking-room is very full, I imagine?" he said, as he welcomed the little doctor. "My cousin has gone to bed, and I thought if you didn't mind coming up, doctor, we should be better off here."

Dr. Aston's answer was characteristically hearty and alert. Knowing it to be Falconer's last night at Nice, he had come round, he said, just for a farewell word, and to arrange, if possible, for a meeting later on under happier circumstances. A quiet chat over a cigar was what he had not hoped for, but the thing of all others he would like. He settled himself with a genial instinct for comfort in the arm-chair Falconer pulled round to the window for him; accepted a cigar and prepared to light it; glancing now and again at the younger man's face with shrewd, kindly eyes, which had already noticed something unusual in its expression.

Dr. Aston and Dennis Falconer had met, some six years before, in Africa, under circumstances which had brought out all that was best in the young man's character; and Dr. Aston had been warmly attracted by him. Being a particularly shrewd student of human nature, he had taken his measure accurately

enough, subsequently, and knew as certainly as one man may of another where his weak points lay, and how time was dealing with them. But his kindness for, and interest in, Dennis Falconer had never abated; perhaps because his insight did not, as so much human insight does, stop at the weak points.

Dennis Falconer, for his part, regarded Dr. Aston with an affectionate respect which he gave to hardly any other man on earth.

There was a short silence as the two men lit their cigars, and then Dr. Aston, with another glance at Falconer's face, broke it with a kindly, delicate enquiry after Mrs. Romaine. Falconer answered it almost absently, but with an instinctive stiffening, so to speak, of his face and voice, and there was another pause. The doctor was trying the experiment of waiting for a lead. He was just deciding that he must make another attempt on his own account when Falconer took his cigar from between his lips and said, with his eyes fixed on the evening sky:

"I'm always glad to see you, doctor; but I never was more glad than to-night."

A sound proceeded from the doctor which might have been described as a grunt if it had been less delicately sympathetic, and Falconer continued:

"I've been trying to think out a problem, and it was one too many for me: the origin of evil."

He was thoroughly in earnest, and nothing was further from him than any thought of lightness or flippancy. But there was a calm familiarity and matter-of-course acquaintanceship with his subject about his tone that produced a slight quiver about the corners of the little doctor's mouth. He did not speak, however, and the movement with which he took his cigar from between his lips and turned to Falconer was merely sympathetic and interested.

"Of course, I know it's an unprofitable subject enough," continued Falconer almost apologetically. "We shall never be much the wiser on the subject, struggle as we may. But still, now and then it seems to be forced on one. It has been forced on me to-day."

"Apropos of William Romaine?" suggested Dr. Aston, so delicately that the words seemed rather a sympathetic comment than a question.

"Yes," returned Falconer. "We have been looking

through his private papers." He paused a moment, and then continued as if drawn on almost in spite of himself. "You knew him by repute, I dare say, doctor. He had one of those strong personalities which get conveyed even by hearsay. A clever man, striking and dominating, universally liked and deferred to. Yet he must have been as absolutely without principle as this table is without feeling."

He struck the little table between them with his open hand as he spoke ; and then, as though the expression of his feelings had begotten, as is often the case, an irresistible desire to relieve himself further, he answered Dr. Aston's interested ejaculation as if it had been the question the doctor was at once too well-bred and too full of tact to put.

"There were no papers connected with this last disgraceful affair, of course ; those, as you know, I dare say, were all seized in London. It's the man's past life that these private papers throw light on. Light, did I say ? It was a life of systematic, cold-blooded villainy, for which no colours could be dark enough."

He had uttered his last sentence involuntarily, as it seemed, and now he laid down his cigar, and turning to Dr. Aston, began to speak low and quickly.

"They are papers of all kinds," he said. "Letters, business documents, memoranda of every description, and two-thirds of them at least have reference to fraud and wrong of one kind or another. Not one penny that man possessed can have been honestly come by. His business was swindling ; every one of his business transactions was founded on fraud. He can have had no faith or honesty of any sort or kind. He was living with another woman before he had been married a year. All that woman's letters—he deceived her abominably, and it's fortunate that she died—are annotated and endorsed like his 'business' memoranda ; evidently kept deliberately as so much stored experience for future use !"

Dr. Aston had listened with a keen, alert expression of intent interest. His cigar was forgotten, and he laid it down now as if impatient of any distraction, and leant forward over the table with his shrewd, kindly little eyes fixed eagerly on Falconer. Human nature was a hobby of his.

Falconer's confidence, or more truly perhaps the manner of it, had swept away all conventional barriers, and the elder man asked two or three quick, penetrating questions.

"How far back do these records go?" he asked finally.

"They cover five-and-twenty years, I should say," returned Falconer. "The first note on a successful fraud must have been made when he was about four-and-twenty. Why, even then—when he was a mere boy—he must have been entirely without moral sense!"

"Yes!" said the doctor, with a certain dry briskness of manner which was apt to come to him in moments of excitement. "That is exactly what he was, my boy! It was that, in conjunction with his powerful brain, that made him what you called, just now, dominating. It gave him vantage-ground over his fellow-men. He was as literally without moral sense as a colour-blind man is without a sense of colour, or a homicidal maniac without a sense of the sanctity of human life."

An expression of rather horrified and entirely uncomprehending protest spread itself over Falconer's face.

"Romaine was not mad," he objected, with that incapacity for penetrating beneath the surface which was characteristic of him. "I never even heard that there was madness in the family."

"You would find it if you looked far enough, without a doubt!" answered the doctor decidedly. "This is a most interesting subject, Dennis, and it's one that it's very difficult to look into without upsetting the whole theory of moral responsibility, and doing more harm than enough. I don't say Romaine was mad, as the word is usually understood, but all you tell me confirms a notion I have had about him ever since this affair came out. He was what we call morally insane. I'll tell you what first put the idea into my head. It was the extraordinary obtuseness, the extraordinary want of perception, of that blunder of his that burst up the whole thing. Look at it for yourself. It was a flaw in his comprehension of moral sense only possible in a man who knew of the quality by hearsay alone. He must have been a very remarkable man. I wish I had known him!"

"I have heard the term 'moral insanity,' of course," said Falconer slowly and distastefully, ignoring the doctor's last, purely æsthetic sentence, "but it has always seemed to me, doctor, if you'll pardon my saying so, a very dangerous tampering with things that should be sacred even from science. I cannot believe that any man is actually incapable of knowing right from wrong."

"The difficulty is," said the doctor drily, "that the words right and wrong sometimes convey nothing to him, as the words red and blue convey nothing to a colour-blind man, and the endearments of his wife convey nothing to the lunatic who is convinced that she is trying to poison him." He paused a moment, and then said abruptly: "Are there any children?"

Falconer glanced at him and changed colour slightly.

"Yes," he said slowly. "One boy!"

The keen, shrewd face of the elder man softened suddenly and indescribably under one of those quick sympathetic impulses which were Dr. Aston's great charm.

"Heaven help his mother!" he said gently.

Falconer moved quickly and protestingly, and there was a touch of something like rebuke in his voice as he said:

"Doctor, you don't mean to say that you think——"

"You believe in heredity, I suppose?" interrupted the doctor quickly. "Well, at least, you believe in the heredity you can't deny—that a child may—or rather must—inherit, not only physical traits and infirmities, but mental tendencies; likes, dislikes, aptitudes, incapacities, or what not. Be consistent, man, and acknowledge the sequel, though it's pleasanter to shut one's eyes to it, I admit. Put the theory of moral insanity out of the question for the moment if you like; say that Romaine was a pronounced specimen of the common criminal. Why should not his child inherit his father's tendency to crime, his father's aptitude for lying and thieving, as he might inherit his father's eyes, or his father's liking for music—if he had had a turn that way? You're a religious man, Falconer, I know. You believe, I take it, that the sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children. How can they be visited more heavily than in their reproduction? You mark my words, my boy, that little child of Romaine's—unless he inherits strong counter influences from his mother, or some far-away ancestor—will go the way his father has gone, and may end as his father has ended!"

There was a slight sound by the door behind the two men as Dr. Aston finished—finished with a force and solemnity that carried a painful thrill of conviction even through the not very penetrable outer crust of dogma which enwrapped Dennis Falconer—and the latter turned his head involuntarily. The next instant both men had sprung to their feet, and were standing dumb and aghast face to face with Mrs. Romaine.

She was standing with her hand still on the lock of the door as if her attention had been arrested just as she was entering the room ; she had apparently recoiled, for she was pressed now tightly against the door ; her face was white to the very lips, and a vague thought passed through Falconer that he had never seen it before. It was as though the look in her eyes, as she gazed at Dr. Aston, had changed it beyond recognition.

There was a moment's dead silence ; a moment during which Dr. Aston turned from red to white and from white to red again, and struggled vainly to find words ; a moment during which Falconer could only stare blankly at that unfamiliar woman's face. Then, while the two men were still utterly at a loss, Mrs. Romaine seemed gradually to command herself, as if with a tremendous effort. Gradually, as he looked at her, Falconer saw the face with which he was familiar shape itself, so to speak, upon that other face he did not know. He saw her eyes change and harden as if with the effort necessitated by her conventional instinct against a scene. He saw the quivering horror of her mouth alter and subside in the hard society smile he knew well, only rather stiffer than usual as her face was whiter ; and then he heard her speak.

With a little movement of her head in civil recognition of Dr. Aston's presence, she said to Falconer :

"My book is on that table. Will you give it to me, please?"

Her voice was quite steady, though thin. Almost mechanically Falconer handed her the book she asked for, and with another slight inclination of her head, before Dr. Aston had recovered his balance sufficiently to speak, she was gone.

The door closed behind her, and a low ejaculation broke from the doctor. Then he drew a long breath, and said slowly :

"That's a remarkable woman."

Falconer drew his hand across his forehead as though he were a little dazed.

"I think not !" he said stupidly. "Not when you know her !"

"Ah !" returned the doctor, with a shrewd glance at him. "And you do know her ?"

If Falconer could have seen Mrs. Romaine an hour later, he would have been more than ever convinced of the correctness of his judgement. The preparations for departure were nearly

concluded ; she had dismissed her maid and was finishing them herself with her usual quiet deliberation, though her face was very pale and set.

But it might have perplexed him somewhat if he had seen her, when everything was done, stop short in the middle of the room and lift her hands to her head as though something oppressed her almost more heavily than she could bear.

"End as his father ended!" she said below her breath. "Ruin and disgrace!"

She turned and crossed the room to where her travelling-bag stood, and drew from it a letter, thrust into a pocket with several others.

It was the blotted little letter which began "My dear Mamma," and when she returned it to the bag at last, her face was once again the face that Dennis Falconer did not know.

## CHAPTER VI

THERE are two diametrically opposed points of view from which London life is regarded by those who know of it only by hearsay ; that from which life in the metropolis is contemplated with somewhat awestruck and dubious eyes as necessarily involving a continuous vortex of society and dissipation ; and that which recognises no so-called "society life" except during the eight or ten weeks of high pressure known as the season. Both these points of view are essentially false. In no place is it possible to lead a more completely hermit-like life than in London ; in no place is it possible to lead a simpler and more hard-working life. On the other hand, that feverish access of stir and movement which makes the months of May and June stand out and focus, so to speak, the attention of onlookers, is only an acceleration and accentuation of the life which is lived in certain strata of the London world for eight or nine months in the year. A large proportion of the intellectual work of the world is done in London ; to be in society is a great assistance to the intellectual worker of to-day on his road to material prosperity ; consequently a large section of "society" is of necessity in London from October to July ; and, since people must have some occupation, even out of the season, social life, in a somewhat lower key, indeed, than the pitch of the season, but on the same artificial foundations, goes on undisturbed, gathering about it, as any institution will do, a crowd of that unattached host of idlers, male and female, whose movements are dictated solely by their own pleasure—or their own weariness.

It was the March of one of the last of the eighties. A wild March wind was taking the most radical liberties with the aristocratic neighbourhood of Grosvenor Place, racing and tearing and shrieking down the chimneys with a total absence of the respect due to wealth. If it could have got in at one in particular of the many drawing-room windows at which it rushed so vigorously, it might have swept round the room and out again with a whoop of amusement. For the room contained



some twelve ladies of varying ages and demeanours, and, with perhaps one or two exceptions, each lady was talking at the top of her speed—which, in some cases, was very considerable—and of her voice—which as a rule was penetrating. Every speaker was apparently addressing the same elderly and placid lady, who sat comfortably back in an arm-chair, and made no attempt to listen to any one. Perhaps she recognised the futility of such a course.

The elderly and placid lady was the mistress of the very handsomely and fashionably furnished drawing-room and of the house to which it belonged. Her dress bore traces—so near to vanishing point that their actual presence had something a little ludicrous about it—of the last lingering stage of widow's mourning. Her name was Pomeroy, Mrs. Robert Pomeroy, and she was presiding over the ladies' committee for a charity bazaar.

Fashionable charities and their frequent concomitant, the fashionable bazaars which have superseded the fashionable private theatricals of some years ago, are generally and perhaps uncharitably supposed by a certain class of cynical unfashionables to have their motive power in a feminine love of excitement and desire for conspicuousness. Perhaps there is another aspect under which they may present themselves; namely, as a proof that not even a long course of society life can destroy the heaven-sent instinct for work, even though the circumstances under which it struggles may render it so mere a travesty of the real thing. From this point of view, and when the promoter of a charitable folly is a middle-aged woman, who puts into the business an almost painfully earnest enthusiasm which might have been so useful if she had only known more of any life outside her own narrow round, the situation is not without its pathos. But when, as in the present instance, a long-established, self-reliant, and venerable philanthropic institution is suddenly "discovered," taken up, and patronised by such a woman as the secretary and treasurer of the present committee; a woman who would have been empty-headed and vociferous in any sphere, and who had been moulded by circumstances into a pronounced specimen of a certain type of fashionable woman, dashing, loud, essentially unsympathetic; the position, in the incongruities and discrepancies involved, becomes wholly humorous.

Mrs. Ralph Halse, in virtue of her office as secretary and

treasurer, was sitting at Mrs. Pomeroy's right hand; her conception as to the duties of her office seemed to be limited to a sense that it behoved her never for a single instant to leave off addressing the chair, and this duty she fulfilled with a conscientious energy worthy of the highest praise. She had "discovered" the well-known and well-to-do institution before alluded to about a month earlier.

\* "Such a capital time of year, you know, when one has nothing to do and can attend to things thoroughly!" she had explained to her friends. She had determined that "something must be done," as she had rather vaguely phrased it, and she had applied herself exuberantly and forthwith to the organisation of a bazaar. The season was Lent; philanthropy was the fashion; Mrs. Halse's scheme became the pet hobby of the moment, and the ladies' committee was selected exclusively from among women well known in society.

The committee was tremendously in earnest; nobody could listen to it and doubt that fact for a moment. At the same time a listener would have found some difficulty in determining what was the particular point which had evoked such enthusiasm, because, as has been said, the members were all talking at once. Their eloquence was checked at last, not, as might have been the case with a cold-blooded male committee, by a few short and pithy words from the gently smiling president, but by the appearance of five o'clock tea. The torrent of declamatory enthusiasm thereupon subsided, quenched in the individual consciousness that took possession of each lady that she was "dying for her tea," and had "really been working like a slave." The committee broke up with charming informality into low-toned duets and trios. Even Mrs. Ralph Halse ceased to address the chair, though she could not cease to express her views on the vital point which had roused the committee to a state bordering on frenzy; she turned to her nearest neighbour. Mrs. Halse was a tall woman, good-looking in a well-developed, highly coloured style, and appearing younger than her thirty-eight years. She was dressed from head to foot in grey, and the delicate sobriety of her attire was oddly out of keeping with her florid personality. As a matter of fact, the hobby which had preceded the present all-absorbing idea of the bazaar in her mind—Mrs. Halse was a woman of hobbies—had been ritualism of an advanced type; perhaps some of the fervour

with which her latest interest had been embraced was due to a certain sense of flatness in its predecessor ; but be that as it may, her present very fashionable attire represented her idea of Lenten mourning.

"I don't see myself how there can be two opinions on the subject," she said. Mrs. Ralph Halse very seldom did see how there could be two opinions on a subject on which her own views were decided. "Fancy dress is a distinct feature, and of course there must be more effect and more variety when each woman is dressed as suits her best, than when there is any attempt at uniform. You agree with me, Lady Bracondale, I'm sure?"

The woman she addressed was of the pronounced elderly aristocratic type, tall and thin, aquiline-nosed and sallow of complexion. She seemed to be altogether superior to enthusiasm of any kind, and her manner was of that unreal kind of dignity and chilling suavity, in which nothing is genuine but its slight touch of condescension.

"Fancy dress is a pretty sight," she said. "But it is perhaps a drawback that of course all the stall-holders cannot be expected to wear it." The words were spoken with an emphasis which plainly conveyed the speaker's sense that no such abrogation of dignity could by any possibility be expected of herself. "What is your opinion, Mrs. Pomeroy?" Lady Bracondale added, turning to the chairwoman of the committee.

Mrs. Pomeroy's attention was not claimed for the moment otherwise than by her serene enjoyment of her cup of tea, which she was sipping with the air of a woman who has done, and is conscious of having done, a hard afternoon's work. Perhaps it is somewhat fatiguing to be talked to by twelve ladies all at once. Lady Bracondale's question was one which Mrs. Pomeroy rarely answered, however, even in her secret heart, so she only smiled now and shook her head thoughtfully.

"Miscellaneous fancy dress gives so much scope for individual taste, don't you think?" said Mrs. Halse.

"Of course it does, my dear Mrs. Halse. Every one can wear what they like, and that is very nice," answered Mrs. Pomeroy comfortably.

"But, on the other hand, a quiet uniform can be worn by any one," said Lady Bracondale with explanatory condescension.

"By any one, of course. So important," assented the chairwoman with bland cheerfulness. Then, as Mrs. Halse's lips parted to give vent to a flood of eloquence, she continued placidly, in her gentle, contented voice: "Mrs. Romaine is not here yet. I wonder what she will say!"

"I met her at the French Embassy last night," said Mrs. Halse, with a slightly aggressive inflection in her voice, "and she told me she meant to come if she could make time. Apparently she has not been able to!"

"Mrs. Romaine?" repeated Lady Bracondale interrogatively. "I don't think I've met her? Really, one feels quite out of the world."

There was a fine affectation of sincerity about the words which would, however, hardly have deceived the most unsophisticated hearer as to the speaker's position in society, or her own appreciation of it. Lady Bracondale was distinctly a person to be known by anybody wishing to make good a claim to be considered in society, and she was loftily conscious of the fact. She had only just returned to town from Bracondale, where she had been spending the last two months.

"Romaine?" she repeated. "Mrs. Romaine! Ah, yes! To be sure! The name is familiar to me. I thought it was. There was a little woman, years ago, whom we met on the Continent. Her husband—dear me, now, what was it? Ah, yes! Her husband failed or—no, of course! I recollect! He was a swindler of some sort. Of course, one never met her again!"

"This Mrs. Romaine is the same, Ralph says," said Mrs. Halse, sipping her tea. "At least, her husband was William Romaine, who was the moving spirit in a big bank swindle—and a lot of other things, I believe—years ago. She turned up about two months ago, and took a house in Chelsea. Lots of money, apparently. She has a grown-up son—he would be grown-up, of course—who is going to the bar."

"But, dear me!" said Lady Bracondale with freezing stateliness, "does she propose to go into society? It was a most scandalous affair, my dear Mrs. Pomeroy, as far as I remember. A connection of Lord Bracondale's lost some money, I recollect; and I think the man—Romaine, I mean, of course—poisoned himself or something. We were at Nice when it happened. He committed suicide there, and it was most unpleasant! She can't expect one to know her!"

Eighteen years had passed since the same woman had expressed herself as eager to make the acquaintance of "the man," and the haze which had wrapped itself in her mind about the tragedy which had frustrated her desire in that direction, was not the only outcome for her of the passing of those years. Lady Bracondale had been Lady Cloughton eighteen years ago, the wife of the eldest son of the Earl of Bracondale; poor, and with a somewhat perfunctorily yielded position. She and her husband had been, moreover, a cheery, easy-tempered pair, living chiefly on the Continent, and getting a good deal of pleasure out of life. His father's death had given to Lord Cloughton the family title and the family lands; and with his accession to wealth, importance, and responsibilities, his wife's whole personality had gradually seemed to become transformed. Her satisfaction in her new dignities took the form of living rigidly up to what she considered their obligations. Laxity, frivolity of any kind, seemed to her to abrogate from the importance of her position. She ranged herself on the side of strict decorum and respectability, and became more precise than the precisians. Her husband at the same time developed talents latent in his obscurity, and became a prominent politician; and the ultra-correct and exclusive Lady Bracondale was now in truth a power in society.

Consequently, the tone in which she disposed of the intruder, who had ventured unauthorised to obtain recognition during her absence, was crushing and conclusive. But Mrs. Pomeroy's individuality was of too soft a consistency to allow of her being crushed; and she replied placidly, and with unconscious practicality.

"People do know her, dear Lady Bracondale," she said. "She had some friends among really nice people to begin with, and every one has called on her. I really don't know how it has happened, but it is years and years ago, you know, and she really is a delightful little woman. Quite wrapped up in her boy!"

Almost before the words were well uttered, before Lady Bracondale could translate into speech the aristocratic disapproval written stiffly on her face, the door was flung open, and the footman announced "Mrs. Romaine!"

## CHAPTER VII

EIGHTEEN years lay between the events which Lady Bracondale recalled so hazily and the Mrs. Romaine who crossed the threshold of Mrs. Pomeroy's drawing-room as the footman spoke her name. Those eighteen years had changed her at once curiously more and curiously less than the years between six-and-twenty and four-and-forty usually change a woman. She looked at the first glance very little older than she had done eighteen years ago; younger, indeed, than she had looked during those early days of her widowhood. Such changes as time had made in her appearance seemed mainly due to the immense difference in the styles of dress now obtaining. The dainty colouring, the cut of her frock, the pose of her bonnet, the arrangement of her hair, with its fluffy curls, all seemed to accentuate her prettiness and to bring out the youthfulness which a little woman without strongly marked features may keep for so long. The fluffy hair was a red-brown now, instead of a pale yellow, and the change was becoming, although it helped greatly, though very subtly, to alter the character of her face. The outline of her features was perhaps a trifle sharper than it had been, and there were sundry lines about the mouth and eyes when it was in repose. But these were obliterated, as a rule, by a characteristic to which all the minor changes in her seemed to have more or less direct reference; a characteristic which seemed to make the very similarity between the woman of to-day and the woman of eighteen years before, seem unreal; the singular brightness and vivacity of her expression. Her features were animated, eager, almost restless; her gestures and movements were alert and quick; her voice, as she spoke to an acquaintance here and there, as she moved up Mrs. Pomeroy's drawing-room, was brisk and laughing. Her dress and demeanour were the dress and demeanour of the day to the subtlest shade; she had been a typical woman of the world eighteen years before; she was a typical woman of the world now. But in the old days the personality of the woman had

been dominated by and merged in the type. Now the type seemed to be penetrated by something from within, which was not to be wholly suppressed.

She came quickly down the long drawing-room, smiling and nodding as she came, and greeted Mrs. Pomeroy with a little exaggerated gesture of despair and apology.

"Have you really finished?" she cried. "Is everything settled? How shocking of me!" Then, as she shook hands with Mrs. Halse, she added, with a sweetness of tone which seemed to cover an underlying tendency which was not sweet: "However, we have such a host in our secretary that really one voice more or less makes very little difference."

"Well, really, I don't know that we have settled anything!" said Mrs. Pomeroy. "We have talked things over, you know. It is such a mistake to be in a hurry! Don't you think so?"

"I've not a doubt of it," was the answer, given with a laugh. "My dear Mrs. Pomeroy, I have been in a hurry for the last six weeks, and it's a frightful state of things. You've had a capital meeting, though. Why, I believe I am actually the only defaulter!"

The hard blue eyes were moving rapidly over the room as Mrs. Romaine spoke; there was an eager comprehensive glance in them as though the survey taken was in some sense a survey of material or—at one instant—of a battle-ground; and it gave a certain unreality to their carelessness.

"The only defaulter. Yes," agreed Mrs. Pomeroy comfortably. "And now, Mrs. Romaine, you must let me introduce you to a new member of our committee; quite an acquisition! Why, where—oh!" and serenely oblivious of the stony stare with which Lady Bracondale, a few paces off, was regarding the opposite wall of the room just over the new-comer's bonnet, Mrs. Pomeroy, with her kind fat hand on Mrs. Romaine's arm, approached the exclusive acquisition! "Let me introduce Mrs. Romaine, dear Lady Bracondale!" she said with unimpaired placidity.

The stony stare was lowered an inch or two until it was about on a level with Mrs. Romaine's eyebrows, and Lady Bracondale bowed icily; but at the same moment Mrs. Romaine held out her hand with a graceful little exclamation of surprise. It was not genuine, though it sounded so; those keen, quick, blue eyes had seen Lady Bracondale and recog-

nised her in the course of their owner's progress up the room, and had observed her withdrawal of herself those two or three paces from Mrs. Pomeroy's vicinity; and it was as they rested for an instant only on her in their subsequent survey of the room that that subtle change suggestive of a sense of coming battle had come to them. They looked full into Lady Bracondale's face now with a smiling ease, which was just touched with a suggestion of pleasure in the meeting.

"I hardly know whether we require an introduction," said Mrs. Romaine; she spoke with cordiality which was just sufficiently careless to be thoroughly "good form." "It is so many years since we met, though, that perhaps our former acquaintanceship must be considered to have died a natural death. I am very pleased that it should have a resurrection!"

She finished with a little light laugh, and Lady Bracondale found, almost to her own surprise, that they were shaking hands. If she had been able to analyse cause and effect—which she was not—she would have known that it was that carelessness in Mrs. Romaine's manner that influenced her. A powerful prompter to a freezing demeanour is withdrawn when the other party is obviously insensible to cold.

"It is really too bad of me to be so late!" continued Mrs. Romaine, proceeding to pass over their past acquaintance as a half-forgotten recollection to which they were both indifferent, and taking up matters as they stood with the easy unconcern and casual conversationalism of a society woman. "At least it would be if my time were my own just now. But as a matter of fact my sole *raison d'être* for the moment is the getting ready of our little place for my boy. I ought to have shut myself up with carpenters and upholsterers until it was done! I assure you I can't even dine out without a guilty feeling that I ought to be seeing after something or other connected with chairs and tables!"

She finished with a laugh about which there was a touch of artificiality, as there had been about her tone as she alluded to her "boy." Perhaps the only thoroughly genuine point about her, at that moment, was a certain intent watchfulness, strongly repressed, in the eyes with which she met Lady Bracondale's gorgon-like stare; and something about the spirited pose of her head and the lines of her face, always recalling, vaguely and indefinitely, that idea of single combat. Lady Bracondale, however, was not a judge of artificiality, and



Mrs. Romaine's manner, with its perfect assurance and careless assumption of a position and a footing in society, affected her in spite of herself. The stony stare relaxed perceptibly as she said, stiffly enough, but with condescending interest :

"You are expecting your son in town?"

"I am expecting him every day, I am delighted to say!" answered Mrs. Romaine, with a little conventional gush of superficial enthusiasm. "Really, you have no idea how forlorn I am without him! We are quite absurdly devoted to one another, as I often tell him, stupid fellow. But I always think—don't you?—that a man is much better out of the way during the agonies of furnishing, so I insisted on his making a little tour while I plunged into the fray. He was very anxious to help, of course, dear fellow. But I told him frankly that he would be more hindrance than help, and packed him off—and made a great baby of myself when he was gone. Of course I have had to console myself by making our little place as perfect as possible, as a surprise for him! You know how these things grow! One little surprise after another comes into one's head, and one excuses oneself for one's extravagance when it's for one's boy."

"Are you thinking of settling in London?" enquired Lady Bracondale.

She was unbending moment by moment in direct contradiction of her preconceived determination. Mrs. Romaine was so bright and so unconscious. She ran off her pretty maternal platitudes with such careless confidence, that iciness on Lady Bracondale's part would have assumed a futile and even ridiculous appearance.

"Yes!" was the answer. "We are going to settle down a regular cosy couple. It has been our castle in the air all the time his education has been going on. He is to read for the bar, and I tell him that he will value a holiday more in another year or two, poor fellow. But I'm afraid I bore about him frightfully!" she added, with another laugh. "And it is rather hard on him, poor boy, for he really is not a bore! I think you will like him, Lady Bracondale. I remember young men always adored you!"

Lady Bracondale smiled, absolutely smiled, and said graciously—graciously for her, that is to say :

"You must bring him to see me! I should like to call upon you if you will give me your card."

Mrs. Romaine was in the act of complying—complying with smiling indifference, which was the very perfection of society manner—when Mrs. Pomeroy, evidently moved solely by the impetus of the excited group of ladies of which she was the serenely smiling centre, bore cheerfully down upon them.

“Perhaps we ought to vote about the fancy dress before we separate this afternoon,” she suggested, “or shall we talk it over a little more at the next meeting? Perhaps that would be wiser. Mrs. Romaine——”

She looked invitingly at Mrs. Romaine as if for her opinion on the subject, and the invitation was responded to with that ever-ready little laugh.

“Oh, let us put it off until the next meeting,” she said. “I am ashamed to say that I really must run away now. But at the next meeting I promise faithfully to be here at the beginning and stay until the very end.”

Whereupon it became evident that the greater part of the committee was anxious to postpone the decision on the knotty point in question, and was conscious of more or less pressing engagements. A general exodus ensued, Mrs. Halse alone remaining to expound her views to Mrs. Pomeroy all by herself and in a higher and more conclusive tone than before.

A neat little coupé was waiting for Mrs. Romaine. She gave the coachman the order “home” at first, and then paused and told him to go to a famous cigar merchant’s. She got into the carriage with a smiling gesture of farewell to Lady Bracondale, whose brougham passed her at the moment; but as she leant back against the cushions the smile died from her lips with singular suddenness. It left her face very intent; the eyes very bright and hard, the lips set and a little compressed. The lines about them and about her eyes showed out faintly under this new aspect of her face in spite of the eager satisfaction which was its dominant expression. The battle had evidently been fought and won and the victor was ready and braced for the next.

She got out at the cigar merchant’s, and when she returned to her carriage there was that expression of elation about her which often attends the perpetration of a piece of extravagance. But as she was driven through the fading sunlight of the March afternoon towards Chelsea, her face settled once more into that intent reflection and satisfaction.

It was a narrow slip of a house at which her coupé

eventually stopped, wedged in among much more imposing-looking mansions in the most fashionable part of Chelsea. But what it lacked in size it made up in brightness and general smartness. It had evidently been recently done up with all the latest improvements in paint, window-boxes, and fittings generally, and it presented a very attractive appearance indeed.

Mrs. Romaine let herself in with a latch-key, and went quickly across the prettily decorated hall into a room at the back of what was evidently the dining-room. She opened the door, and then stood still upon the threshold.

The light of the setting sun was stealing in at the window, the lower half of which was filled in with Indian blinds; and as it fell in long slanting rays across the silent room, it seemed to emphasize and, at the same time, to soften and beautify an impression of waiting and of expectancy that seemed to emanate from everything that room contained. It was furnished—it was not large—as a compromise between a smoking-room and a study, and its every item, from the bookcases and the writing-table to the bronzes on the mantelpiece, was in the most approved and latest style, and of the very best kind. Every conceivable detail had evidently been thought out and attended to; the room was obviously absolutely complete and perfect—only on the writing-table something seemed lacking, and some brown paper parcels lay there waiting to be unfastened—and it had as obviously never been lived in. It was like a body without a soul.

The lingering light stole along the wall, touching here and there those unused objects waiting, characterless, for that strange character which the personality of a man impresses always on the room in which he lives, and its last touch fell upon the face of the woman standing in the doorway. The artificiality of its expression was standing out in strong relief as if in half conscious, half instinctive struggle with something that lay behind, something which the aspect of that empty room had developed out of its previous intentness and excitement. With a little affected laugh, as though some one else had been present—or as though affectation were indeed second nature to her—Mrs. Romaine went up to the writing-table and began to undo the parcels lying there. They contained a very handsome set of fittings for a man's writing-table, and she arranged them in their places, clearing away the paper *with scrupulous care*, and with another little laugh.

"What a ridiculous woman!" she said half aloud, with just the intonation she had used in speaking to Lady Bracondale of her "little surprises" for "her boy." "And what a spoilt fellow!"

She turned away, went out of the room, with one backward glance as she closed the door, and upstairs to the drawing-room. She had just entered the room when a thought seemed to strike her.

"How utterly ridiculous!" she said to herself. "I quite forgot to notice whether there were any letters!"

She was just crossing the room to ring for a servant when the front-door bell rang vigorously and she stopped short. With an exclamation of surprise she went to the door and stood there listening, that she might prepare herself beforehand for the possible visitor, for whom she evidently had no desire. "How tiresome!" she said to herself. "Who is it, I wonder?" She heard the parlourmaid go down the hall and open the door.

"Mrs. Romaine at home?"

With a shock and convulsion, which only the wildest leap of the heart can produce, the listening face in the drawing-room doorway, with the conventional smile which might momentarily be called for just quivering on it, half in abeyance, half in evidence, was suddenly transformed. Every trace of artificiality fell away, blotted out utterly before the swift, involuntary flash of mother love and longing with which those hard blue eyes, those pretty, superficial little features were, in that instant, transfigured. The elaborately dressed figure caught at the door-post, as any homely drudge might have done; the woman of the world, startled out of—or into—herself, forgot the world.

"It's Julian!" the white, trembling lips murmured. "Julian!"

As she spoke the word, up the stairs two steps at a time, there dashed a tall, fair-haired young man who caught her in his arms with a delighted laugh—her own laugh, but with a boyish ring of sincerity in it.

"I've taken you by surprise, mother!" he cried. "You've never opened my telegram!"

1

## CHAPTER VIII

MRS. ROMAYNE had been left, eighteen years before, absolutely penniless. When Dennis Falconer took her back from Nice to her uncle's home in London, she had returned to that house wholly dependent, for herself and for her little five-year-old boy, on the generosity she would meet with there. Fortunately old Mr. Falconer was a rich man. There had been a good deal of money in the Falconer family, and as its representatives decreased in number, that money had collected itself in the hands of a few survivors.

A long nervous illness, slight enough in itself, but begetting considerable restlessness and irritability, had followed on her return to London. So natural, her tender-hearted cousin had said, though, as a matter of fact, such an illness was anything but natural in such a woman as Mrs. Romaine, and anything but consistent with her demeanour during the early days of her widowhood. Partly by the advice of the doctor, partly by reason of the sense, unexpressed but shared by all concerned, that London was by no means a desirable residence for the widow of William Romaine, old Mr. Falconer and his daughter left their quiet London home and went abroad with her. No definite period was talked of for their return to England, and they settled down in a charming little house near the Lake of Geneva.

In the same house, when Julian was seven years old, Frances Falconer died. Her death was comparatively sudden, and the blow broke her father's heart. From that time forward his only close interests in life were Mrs. Romaine and her boy. The vague expectation of a return to London at some future time faded out altogether. Mr. Falconer's only desire was to please his niece, and she, with the same tendency towards seclusion which had dictated their first choice of a Continental home, suggested a place near Heidelberg. Here they lived for five years more, and then Mr. Falconer, also, died, leaving the bulk of his property to Mrs. Romaine. The remainder was to go to Dennis Falconer; to his only

other near relation, William Romaine's little son, he left no money.

So seven years after her husband's death Mrs. Romaine was a rich woman again; rich and independent as she had never been before, and practically alone in the world with her son. In her relations with her son, those seven years had brought about a curious alteration or development.

The dawns of this change had been observed by Frances Falconer during the early months of Mrs. Romaine's widowhood. She had spoken to her father with tears in her eyes of her belief that her cousin was turning for consolation to her child. Blindly attached to her cousin, she had never acknowledged her previous easy indifference as a mother. She stood by while the first place in little Julian's easy affections was gradually won away from herself not only without a thought of resentment, but without any capacity for the criticism of Mrs. Romaine's demeanour in her new capacity as a devoted mother. To her that devotion was the natural and beautiful outcome of the overthrow of her cousin's married life. To sundry other people the new departure presented other aspects. Dennis Falconer, spending a few days at the house near the Lake of Geneva, regarded with eyes of stern distaste what seemed to him the most affected, superficial travesty of the maternal sentiment ever exhibited. Meditating upon the subject by himself, he referred Mrs. Romaine's assumption of the character of devoted mother to the innate artificiality of a fashionable woman denied the legitimate outlet of society life. He went away marvelling at the blindness of his uncle and cousin, and asking himself with heavy disapprobation how long the pose would last.

Time, as a matter of fact, seemed only to confirm it. The half-laughing, wholly artificial manner with which Mrs. Romaine had alluded to her "boy" in Mrs. Pomeroy's drawing-room was the same manner with which, in his early school-days, she had alluded to her "little boy," only developed by years. Mr. Falconer's death and her own consequent independence had made no difference in her way of life. Julian's education had been proceeded with on the Continent as had been already arranged, his mother living always near at hand that they might be together whenever it was possible. In his holidays they took little luxurious tours together. But into society Mrs. Romaine went not at all

until Julian was over twenty ; when the haze of fifteen years had wound itself about the memory of William Romaine and his misdeeds.

Of those misdeeds William Romaine's son knew nothing. The one point of discord between old Mr. Falconer and his niece had been her alleged intention of keeping the truth from him, if possible, for ever. Mr. Falconer's death removed the only creature who had a right to protest against her decision. When Julian, as he grew older, asked his first questions about his father, she told him that he had "failed," and had died suddenly, and begged him not to question her. And the boy, careless and easy-going, had taken her at her word.

With the termination of Julian's university career, it became necessary that some arrangement should be made for his future. As Julian grew up, the topic had come up between the mother and son with increasing frequency, introduced as a rule not, as might have been expected, by the young man, whom it most concerned, but by Mrs. Romaine. From the very first it had been presented to him as a foregone conclusion that the start in life to which he was to look forward was to be made in London. London was to be their home, and he was to read for the English bar ; on these premises all Mrs. Romaine's plans and suggestions were grounded, and Julian's was not the nature to carve out the idea of a future for himself in opposition to that presented to him. Consequently the arrangements, of which the bright little house in Chelsea was the preliminary outcome, were matured with much gaiety and enthusiasm, in what Mrs. Romaine called merrily "a family council of two" ; and a certain touch of feverish excitement which had pervaded his mother's consideration of the subject, moved Julian to a carelessly affectionate compunction in that it was presumably for his sake that she had remained so long away from the life she apparently preferred.

The arrangement by which Mrs. Romaine eventually came to London alone was not part of the original scheme. As the time fixed for their departure thither drew nearer, that feverish excitement increased upon her strangely. It seemed as an expression of the nervous restlessness that possessed her that she finally insisted on his joining some friends who were going for two months to Egypt, and leaving her to "struggle with the agonies of furnishing," as she said, alone.

The arrangement had separated the mother and son for the

first time within Julian's memory. The fact had, perhaps, had little practical influence on his enjoyment in the interval, but it gave an added fervour to his boyish demonstration of delight in that first moment of meeting as he held her in his vigorous young arms, and kissed her again and again.

"To think of my having surprised you, after all!" he cried gleefully, at last. "You ought to have had my telegram this morning. Why, you've got nervous while you've been alone, mother! You're quite trembling!"

Mrs. Romaine laughed a rather uncertain little laugh. She was indeed trembling from head to foot. Her face was very pale still, but as she raised it to her son the strange, transfigured look had passed from it utterly, and her normal expression had returned to it in all its superficial liveliness, brought back by an effort of will, conscious or instinctive, which was perceptible in the slight stiffness of all the lines. At the same moment she seemed to become aware of the close, clinging pressure with which her hand had closed upon the arm which held her, and she relaxed it in a gesture of playful rebuke and deprecation.

"What would you have, bad boy?" she said lightly. "Don't you know I hate surprises? Oh, I suppose you want to flatter yourself that your poor little mother can't get on without you to take care of her! Well, perhaps she can't, very well. There's a demoralising confession for you, sir!"

But it was not such a confession as her face had been only a few minutes before; in fact, the spoken words seemed rather to belie that mute witness. They were spoken in her ordinary tone, and the gesture with which she laid her hand on his arm to draw him into the drawing-room was one of her usual pretty, affected gestures—as sharp a contrast as possible to the first clinging, unconscious touch.

"Let me look at you," she said gaily, "and make sure that I have got my own bad penny back from Africa, and not somebody else's!"

She drew him laughingly into the fullest light the fading day afforded, and proceeded to "inspect" him, as she said, her face full of a superficial vivacity, which seemed to be doing battle all the time with something behind—something which looked out of her hard, bright eyes, eager and insistent.

Julian Romaine was a tall, well-made young man—taller by a head than the mother smiling up at him; he was well developed for his twenty-three years, slight and athletic—



looking, and carrying himself more gracefully than most young Englishmen. But except in this particular, and in a slight tendency towards the use of more gesture than is common in England, his foreign training was in no wise perceptible in his appearance. The first impression he made on people who knew them both was that he was exactly like his mother, and that his mother's features touched into manliness were a very desirable inheritance for her son; for he was distinctly good-looking. But as a matter of fact, only the upper part of his face, and his colouring, were Mrs. Romaine's. He had the fair hair which had been hers eighteen years ago; he had her blue eyes and her pale complexion, and his nose and the shape of his brow were hers. But his mouth was larger and rather fuller-lipped than his mother's, and the line of the chin and jaw was totally different. No strongly-marked characteristics, either intellectual or moral, were to be read in his face; his expression was simply bright and good-tempered with the good temper which has never been tried, and is the result rather of circumstances than of principle.

That strange something in Mrs. Romaine's face seemed to retreat into the depths from which it had come as she looked at him. She finished her inspection with a gay tirade against the coat which he was wearing, and Julian replied with a boyish laugh.

"I knew you'd be down upon it!" he said. "I say, does it look so very bad? I'll get a new fit out to-morrow—two or three, in fact! Mother, what an awfully pretty little drawing-room! What an awfully clever little mother you are!"

He flung his arm round her again with the careless, affectionate demonstrativeness which her manner seemed to produce in him, and looked round the room with admiring eyes. They were the eyes of a young man who knew better than some men twice his age how a room should look, and whose appreciation was better worth having than it seemed.

"You're quite ready for me, you see!" he declared delightedly. "What did you mean, I should like to know, by wanting to keep me away for another fortnight?"

There was a moment's pause before Mrs. Romaine spoke. She looked up into his face with a rather strange expression in her eyes, and then looked away across the room to where a little pile of accepted invitations lay on her writing-table. That curious light at once of battle and of triumph was strong upon her face as it had not been yet.

"Yes," she said at last, and there was an unusual ring about her voice. "I am quite ready for you!"

Something more than the furnishing of a house had gone to the preparation of a place in society for the widow and son of William Romaine, and only the woman who had effected that preparation knew how, and how completely it had been achieved.

A moment later Mrs. Romaine's face had changed again, and she was laughing lightly at Julian's comments as she disengaged herself from his hold, and went towards the bell.

"Foolish boy!" she said as she rang. "I'm glad you think it's nice. We'll have some tea."

She had just poured him out a cup of tea, and quick, easy question and answer as to his crossing were passing between them, when the front-door bell rang, and she broke off suddenly in her speech.

"Who can that be?" she said. "Hardly a caller; it must be six o'clock! Now, I wonder whether, if it should be a caller, Dawson will have the sense to say not at home? Perhaps I had better——" she rose as she spoke, and moved quickly across the room to the door. But she was too late! As she opened the drawing-room door she heard the street door open below, and heard the words, "At home, ma'am." With the softest possible ejaculation of annoyance she closed the door stealthily.

"Such a nuisance!" she said rapidly. "What a time to call! I trust they won't——" And thereupon her face changed suddenly and completely into her usual society smile as the door opened again, and she rose to receive her visitors. "My dear Mrs. Halse!" she exclaimed, "why, what a delightful surprise! Now, don't say that you have come to tell me that anything has gone wrong about the bazaar?" she continued agitatedly. "Don't tell me that, Miss Pomeroy!"

She was shaking hands with her younger visitor as she spoke, a girl of apparently about twenty, very correctly dressed, as pretty as a girl can be with neither colour, expression, nor startlingly correct features, whose eyes are for the most part fastened on the ground. She was Mrs. Pomeroy's only child. She did not deal Mrs. Romaine the blow which the latter appeared to anticipate, but reassured her in a neatly constructed sentence uttered in a rather demure but perfectly self-possessed voice,

Mrs. Halse had been prevented for the moment from monopolising the conversation by reason of her keen interest in the good-looking young man standing by the fireplace; but Miss Pomeroy's words were hardly uttered before she turned excitedly to Mrs. Romaine. If she was going to make a mistake the disagreeables of the position would be with her hostess, she had decided.

"It's your son, Mrs. Romaine?" she cried. "It must be, surely! Such a wonderful likeness! Only, really, I can hardly believe that your son—I was ridiculous enough to expect quite a boy! Oh, don't say that he has just arrived and we are interrupting your first *tête-à-tête*! How truly frightful! Let me tell you this moment what I came for and fly!"

Mrs. Romaine answered her with a suave smile.

"I am going to introduce my boy first, if you don't mind," she said, and then as Julian, in obedience to her look, came forward, with the easy alacrity of a young man whose social instincts are of the highly civilised kind, she laid her hand on his arm with an artificial air of affectionate pride, and continued lightly: "Your first London introduction, Julian, Mrs. Ralph Halse, Miss Pomeroy! He has only just arrived, as you guessed," she added in an aside to Mrs. Halse, "and no doubt he is furiously angry with me for allowing him to be caught with the dust of his journey on him."

But Julian's anger was not perceptible in his face, or in his manner, which was very pleasant and ready. Even after he had handed tea and cake and subsided into conversation with Miss Pomeroy, Mrs. Halse found it difficult to concentrate herself on the business which had brought her to Chelsea. Her speech to Mrs. Romaine, as to the brilliant idea which had struck her just after the committee broke up, was as voluble as usual, certainly, but less connected than it might have been.

"That's all right, then. Such a weight off my mind!" she said, as she copied an address into her note book with a circumstance and importance which would have befitted the settlement of the fate of nations. "It is so important to get things settled at once, don't you think so? The moment it occurred to me I saw how important it was that there should not be a moment's delay, and I said to Maud Pomeroy: 'Let us go at once to Mrs. Romaine, and she will give us the address, and then dear Mrs. Pomeroy can write the letter to—'

night." Here Mrs. Halse's breath gave out for the moment, and she let her eyes, which had strayed constantly in the direction of Julian and Miss Pomeroy, rest on the young man's good-looking, well-bred face. "We must have your son among the stewards, Mrs. Romaine," she said. "So important! Now, I wonder whether it has occurred to you, as it has occurred to me, that a man or two—just a man or two"—with an impressive emphasis on the last word, as though three men would be altogether beside the mark—"would be rather an advantage on the ladies' committee? Now, what is your opinion, Mr. Romaine? Don't you think you could be very useful to us?"

She turned towards Julian as she spoke, quite regardless of the fact that Miss Pomeroy's correctly modulated little voice was stopped by her tones; and Mrs. Romaine turned towards him also. He and Miss Pomeroy were sitting together on the other side of the room, and as her eye fell upon the pair, a curious little flash, as of an idea or a revelation, leaped for an instant into Mrs. Romaine's eye.

Julian moved and transferred his attention to Mrs. Halse, with an easy courtesy which was a curiously natural reproduction of his mother's more artificial manner, and which was at the same time very young and unassuming. He laughed lightly.

"I shall be delighted to be a steward," he said, "or to be useful in any way. But the idea of a ladies' committee is awe-inspiring."

"You would make great fun of us at your horrid clubs, no doubt," retorted Mrs. Halse. "Oh, I know what you young men are! But you can be rather useful in these cases sometimes, though, of course, it doesn't do to tell you so."

She laughed loudly, and then rose with a sudden access of haste.

"We must really go!" she said. "Maud"—Mrs. Halse had innumerable girl friends, all of whom she was wont to address by their Christian names—"Maud, we are behaving abominably. We mustn't stay another moment, not another second."

But they did stay a great many other seconds, while Mrs. Halse pressed Julian into the service of the bazaar in all sorts and kinds of capacities, and managed to find out a great deal

about his past life in the process. When at last she swooped down upon Maud Pomeroy, metaphorically speaking, as though that eminently decorous young lady had been responsible for the delay, and carried her off in a very tornado of protestation, attended to the front door, as in courtesy bound, by Julian, Mrs. Romaine, left alone in the drawing-room, let her face relax suddenly from its responsive brightness into an unmistakeable expression of feminine irritation and dislike.

"Horrid woman!" she said to herself. "Patronises me! Well, she will talk about nothing but Julian all this evening, wherever she may be—and she goes everywhere—so perhaps it has been worth while to endure her." Then, as Julian appeared again, she said gaily: "My dear boy, they've been here an hour, and we shall both be late for dinner! Be off with you and dress!"

It was a very cosy little dinner that followed. Mrs. Romaine, as carefully dressed for her son as she could have been for the most critical stranger, was also at her brightest and most responsive. They talked for the most part of people and their doings; society gossip. Mrs. Romaine told Julian all about Mrs. Halse's bazaar; deriding the whole affair as an excuse for deriding its promoter, but with no realisation of its innate absurdity; and giving Julian to understand, at the same time, that it was "the thing" to be in it; an idea which he was evidently quite capable of appreciating. Dinner over, she drew his arm playfully through hers and took him all over the house.

"Let me see that you approve!" she said with a laughing assumption of burlesque suspense.

The last room into which she took him was the little room at the back of the dining-room; and as his previous tone of appreciation and pleasure developed into genuine boyish exclamations of delight at the sight of it, the instant's intense satisfaction in her face struck oddly on her manner.

"You like it, my lord?" she said. "My disgraceful extravagance is rewarded by your gracious approval? Then your ridiculous mother is silly enough to be pleased." She gave him a little careless touch, half shake and half caress, and Julian threw his arm round her rapturously.

"I should think I did like it!" he said boyishly. "I say, shan't I have to work hard here! Mother, what an awfully jolly smoking-table!"

"Suppose you smoke here now," suggested Mrs. Romaine, "by way of taking possession? Oh, yes! I'll stay with you."

She sat down, as she spoke, in one of the low basket-chairs by the fire, taking a little hand-screen from the mantelpiece as she did so. And Julian, with an exclamation of supreme satisfaction, threw himself into a long lounging-chair with an air of general proprietorship which sat oddly on his youthful figure; and proceeded to select and light a cigar.

A silence followed—rather a long silence. Julian lay back in his chair, and smoked in luxurious contentment. Mrs. Romaine sat with her dainty head, with its elaborate arrangement of red-brown hair, resting against a cushion, her face half hidden by the shade thrown by the fire-screen as she held it up in one slender, ringed hand. She seemed to be looking straight into the fire; as a matter of fact her eyes were fixed on the boyish face beside her. She was the first to break silence.

"It is two, nearly three, months since we were together," she said.

The words might have been the merest comment in themselves; but there was something in the bright tone in which they were spoken, something—half suggestion, half invitation—which implied a desire to make them the opening of a conversation. Julian Romaine's perceptions, however, were by no means of the acutest, and he detected no undertone.

"So it is!" he assented, with dreamy cheerfulness.

"How long did you spend in Cairo?"

The question, which came after a pause, was evidently another attempt on a new line. Again it failed.

"Didn't I tell you? Ten days!" said Julian lazily.

Mrs. Romaine changed her position. She leant forward, her elbow on her knee, her cheek resting on her hand, the screen still shading her face.

"The catechism is going to begin," she said gaily.

Julian's cigar was finished. He roused himself, and dropped the end into the ash-tray by his side as he said with a smile:

"What catechism?"

"Your catechism, sir," returned his mother. "Do you suppose I am going to let you off without insisting on a full and particular account of all your doings during the last ten weeks?"

"A full and particular account of all my doings!" he said.

"I say, that sounds formidable, doesn't it? The only thing is, you've had it in my letters."

"The fullest and most particular?" she laughed.

"The fullest and most particular!"

"Never mind," she exclaimed, leaning back in her chair again with a restless movement, "I shall catechise all the same. My curiosity knows no limits, you see. Now, you are on your honour as a—as a spoilt boy, understand."

"On my honour as a spoilt boy! All right. Fire away, mum!"

He pulled himself up, folding his hands with an assumption of "good little boy" demeanour, and laughing into her face. She also drew herself up, and laughed back at him.

"Question one: Have you lost your heart to any pretty girl in the past ten weeks?"

"No, mum."

"Question two: Have you flirted—much—with any girl, pretty or plain?"

"No, mum."

"Have you overdrawn your allowance?"

"No, mum. I've got such a jolly generous mother, mum!"

"Have you— Oh! Have you any secrets from your mother?"

The question broke from her in a kind of cry, but she turned it before it was finished into burlesque, and Julian burst into a shout of laughter.

"Not a solitary secret! There, will that do?"

She was looking straight into his face—her own still in shadow—and there was a moment's pause; almost a breathless pause on her part it seemed; then she broke into a laugh.

"That will do capitally," she said. "The catechism is over."

She rose as she spoke, and added a word or two about a note she had to write.

"We may as well go up into the drawing-room if you have finished smoking," she said. "It is an invitation from some friends of the Pomeroy—a dinner. By-the-bye, don't you think Miss Pomeroy a very pretty girl?"

Julian's response was rather languid, but his mother did not press the point. She turned away to replace the screen on the mantelpiece, and as she did so a thought seemed to strike her.

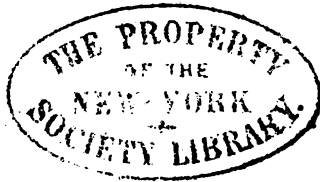
"Oh, Julian!" she said. "Did you go to Alexandria? What about those curtains you were to get me?"

Her back was towards Julian, and she did not notice the instant's hesitation which preceded his reply. He was putting his cigar-case into his pocket, and the process seemed to demand all his attention.

"I didn't go to Alexandria, unfortunately," he said lightly. "The Fosters had been there, and didn't care to go again."

The clock struck twelve that night when Mrs. Romaine rose at last from the chair in front of her bedroom fireplace in which she had been sitting for more than an hour. The fire had gone out before her eyes unnoticed, and she shivered a little as she rose. Her face was strangely pale and haggard-looking, and the red-brown hair harmonised ill with the anxiety of its look.

"It begins from to-night!" she said to herself. "It is his man's life that begins from to-night!"





## CHAPTER IX

“QUITE a presentable fellow !”

There was an unusual ring of excitement in Mrs. Romaine's voice ; it was about ten o'clock in the evening, and she was standing in the middle of her own drawing-room, looking up into Julian's face, as he stood before her, having just come into the room, smiling back at her with a certain touch of excitement about his appearance also. He was in evening dress ; he had evidently bestowed particular pains upon his attire, and the flower in his buttonhole was an exceptionally dainty one.

Mrs. Romaine was also in evening dress, and in evening dress of the most elaborate description. From the point of view of the fashion of the day, her appearance was absolutely perfect ; no detail, from the arrangement of her hair to the point of the silk shoe just visible beneath her skirt, had been neglected ; everything was in good taste and in the height of fashion, and the effect of the whole, heightened by the background afforded by the quiet little drawing-room with its softly shaded lamps, was almost startling in its suggestion of luxury and refinement. The fashion of the moment was peculiarly becoming to Mrs. Romaine, and evening dress, with its artificialities and its conventionalities, always enhanced her good points, strictly conventional as they were. With that light of excitement on her face, and a certain suggestion about her of verve and vivacity, she looked almost charming enough to justify the boyish exclamations of exaggerated admiration into which Julian had broken on entering the room.

There was an eager, restless happiness in her eyes, which leapt up into almost triumphant life as she gave a little touch to Julian's buttonhole ; and then pushed him a step or two further back, that she might look at him again, and repeated her commendatory words with a laugh. Then, on a little gesture from her, he picked up her cloak, which lay on a chair near, put it carefully about her, and, opening the door for her, followed her downstairs.

Nearly three weeks had elapsed since Julian's arrival in London, and in that time, short as it was, his expression had

changed somewhat. There was a quickened interest and alertness about it which detracted from his boyishness, inasmuch as it made him look as though life had actually begun for him. It would have been wholly untrue to say that any touch of responsibility or ambition had dawned upon his good-looking young face; but a subtle something had come to it which was, perhaps, a materialisation of a mental movement which did duty for those emotions. In the course of those three weeks he had had several interviews with the man with whom he was to read; all the preliminaries of his legal career had been settled; and in more than one half-laughing talk with his mother on the conclusion of some arrangement, the preliminaries had been far outstripped, and he had been conducted in triumph to the bench itself.

But in all these buildings of castles in the air, there was a factor in the foundations of his fortunes never allowed by his mother to drop out of sight; the main factor it became when she was the architect, relegating to a subordinate position even the hard work on which Julian was wont to expatiate with enthusiasm and energy. Sometimes as a means, sometimes as an end, sometimes as the sum total of all human ambition, social success, social position were woven into all his schemes for the future as they talked together; woven in with no direct statements or precepts; but with an insidious insistence, and a tacit assumption of their value in the scale of things as a truism in no need of formulation.

Society life had begun for him with the very day after his arrival in town, and had moved briskly with him through the following weeks; briskly, but in a small way. Easter had intervened, and no large entertainments had been given. To-night was to be, as Mrs. Romaine said gaily as she settled her train and her cloak in the brougham into which he had followed her, his first public appearance. They were on their way to the first "smart affair" of the coming season; a dance to be given at a house in Park Lane; not very large, but very desirable, at which—again on Mrs. Romaine's authority—all the right people would be.

"You must dance, of course, but not all the evening, Julian!" his mother said, as their drive drew to an end. "I shall want to introduce you a good deal. And don't engage yourself for supper if you can help it. I'm sorry to be so hard upon you!"

She finished with a laugh, light as her tone had been throughout. Then their carriage drew up suddenly, and her face, in shadow for the moment, changed strangely. For an instant all the happiness, all the excitement and superficiality died out of it, quenched in a kind of revelation of heart-sick anxiety so utterly out of all proportion with the occasion, as to be absolutely ghastly; ghastly as only a momentary revelation of the cruel cross-purposes and incongruities of life can be. The next moment, as Julian sprang out of the carriage and turned to help her out, her expression changed again.

It took them some time to get up to the drawing-room, for though the party was by no means a crush, they had arrived at the most fashionable moment, and the staircase was crowded. Salutations, conveyed by graceful movements of the head, passed across an intervening barrier of gay dresses and black coats between Mrs. Romaine and numbers of acquaintances above her or below her on the stairs; and as she smiled and bowed she murmured comments to Julian—names or data, criticisms of dress or appearance—until at last patience, and the continual movement of the stream of which they made part, brought them face to face with their hostess. The conventional hand-shake, the conventional words of greeting passed between that lady and Mrs. Romaine, and then the latter indicated Julian with a smiling gesture.

"Let me introduce my boy, Lady Arden," she said. "So glad to have the opportunity!"

She spoke with an accentuation of that self-conscious, self-deriding maternal pride which was her usual pose, setting, as it were, her tone for the night. And certainly Julian, as he bowed, and then shook the hand Lady Arden held out to him, was a legitimate subject for pride. His sense of the importance of the occasion had given to his manner and expression not only that touch of excitement which made him positively handsome, but a certain added readiness and assurance, by no means presuming and very attractive. Lady Arden's eyes rested on him with obvious approval, as she said the few words the situation demanded with unusual graciousness, and a sign from her brought one of her daughters to her side. She introduced Julian to the girl.

"Take care of Mr. Romaine, Ida," she said. "He has only lately come to London. Find him some nice partners."

"And let me have him back by-and-by, please, Lady Ida!" *laughed Mrs. Romaine*, as they passed on with the girl into

the room. "There are some friends of his mother's to whom he must spare a little time to-night."

The gay replies with which Julian and his guide—who after a comprehensive glance at him had shown considerable readiness to do her mother's bidding—disappeared in the crowd were lost to Mrs. Romaine; her attention was claimed by a man at her elbow.

"May I have a dance, Mrs. Romaine?" he said.

Mrs. Romaine shook hands and laughed.

"Well, really I don't know," she said; "I think I must give up dancing from to-night. I've got a great grown-up son here, do you know. Look, there he is with Lady Ida Arden! Nice-looking boy, isn't he? It doesn't seem the right thing for his mother to be dancing about, now does it?"

She laughed again, a gay little laugh, well in the key she had set in her first introduction of Julian, and the man to whom she spoke protested vigorously.

"It seems to me exactly the right thing," he said. "The idea of your having a grown-up son is the preposterous point, don't you know. Come, I say, Mrs. Romaine, don't be so horribly hard-hearted!"

"But I must introduce him, don't you see. I must do my duty as a mother."

"Lady Ida is introducing him! She has introduced him to half-a-dozen of the best girls in the room already."

The colloquy, carried on on either side in the lightest of tones, finally ended in Mrs. Romaine's promising a "turn by-and-by," and the couple drifted apart; Mrs. Romaine to find acquaintances close at hand. Among the first she met was Lady Bracondale, condescendingly amiable, to whom she pointed out Julian, with laughing self-excuse. He was dancing now, and dancing extremely well.

"I am so absurdly proud of him!" she said. "I want to introduce him to you by-and-by, if I can catch him. But dancing men are so inconveniently useful."

Some time had worn away, and she had repeated the substance of this speech in sundry forms to sundry persons, before Julian rejoined her. She had cast several rather preoccupied glances in his direction, when she became aware of him on the opposite side of the room, threading his way through the intervening groups in her direction, just as she was accosted by a rather distinguished-looking, elderly man.

"How do you do, Mrs. Romaine? They tell me that you have a grown-up son here, and I decline to believe it."

He spoke in a pleasant, refined voice, marred, however, by all the affectation of the day, and with a tone about it as of a man absolutely secure of position and used to some amount of homage. He was a certain Lord Garstin, a distinguished figure in London society, rich, well-bred, and idle. He was troubled with no ideals. Fashionable women, with all the weaknesses which he knew quite well, were quite as high a type of woman as he thought possible; or, at least, desirable; and he had a considerable admiration for Mrs. Romaine as a very highly-finished and attractive specimen of the type he preferred.

She shook hands with him with a laugh, and a gathering together of her social resources, so to speak, which suggested that in her scheme of things he was a power whose suffrage was eminently desirable.

"It is true, notwithstanding," she said brightly. "I am the proud possessor of a grown-up son, Lord Garstin; a very dear boy, I assure you. We are settling down in London together."

"Is it possible?" was the answer, uttered with exaggerated incredulity. "And what are you going to do with him, may I ask?"

"He is reading for the bar——" began Mrs. Romaine; and then becoming aware that the subject of her words had by this time reached her side, she turned slightly, and laid her hand on Julian's arm with a pretty gesture. "Here he is," she said. "Let me introduce him. Julian, this is Lord Garstin. He has been kindly asking me about you."

Julian knew all about Lord Garstin, and his tone and manner as he responded to his mother's words were touched with a deference which made them, as his mother said to herself, "just what they ought to be." The elder man looked him over with eyes which, as far as their vision extended, were as keen as eyes need be.

"A great many of your mother's admirers will find it difficult to realise your existence," he said pleasantly. "Though of course we have all heard of you. You are going to the bar, eh?"

Lord Garstin had a great following among smart young men, and the fact was rather a weakness of his. He liked to

have young men about him ; to be admired and imitated by them. His manner to Julian was characteristic of these tastes ; free from condescension as superiority can only be when it is absolute and unassailable, and full of easy familiarity.

Mrs. Romaine, standing fanning herself between them, listened for Julian's reply with a certain intent suspense beneath her smile ; Lord Garstin's approval was so important to him. The simple, unaffected frankness of the answer satisfied her ear, and Lord Garstin's expression, as he listened to it, satisfied her eye ; and with a laughing comment on Julian's words, she allowed her attention to be drawn away for the moment by an acquaintance who claimed it in passing.

There was a slight flush of elation on her face when, a few moments later, the chat between Lord Garstin and Julian being broken off, the former moved away with a friendly nod to the young man, and a little gesture and smile to herself, significant of congratulation.

"Come and walk round the room," she said gaily, slipping her hand through Julian's arm. "There are hundreds of people you must be introduced to."

During the half-hour that followed, Julian was introduced to a large proportion of those people in the room who were best worth knowing. Mrs. Romaine seemed to have wasted no time on the acquaintance of mediocrities.

His presentation to Lady Bracondale had just been accomplished, when Mrs. Halse appeared upon the scene and greeted Mrs. Romaine with stereotyped enthusiasm.

"Such a success !" she said in a loud whisper, as Julian talked to Lady Bracondale. "Everybody is quite taken by surprise. I don't know why, I'm sure, but I don't think any one was prepared for such a charming young man. I've been quite in love with him ever since I saw him first, you know, and we really must have him on the bazaar committee." Mrs. Halse had been out of town for Easter, and the affairs of the bazaar had been somewhat in abeyance in consequence. "Mr. Romaine," she continued, seizing upon Julian, "I want to talk to you. You really must help me——"

At this juncture the man who had pressed Mrs. Romaine to dance earlier in the evening came up to her and claimed the promise she had made him then. She cast a glance of laughing pity at Julian, intended for his eyes alone, and moved away.

"It was too bad, mother," he declared, laughing, as he met her a little later coming out of the dancing-room. "Now, to make up you must have one turn with me—just one. We haven't danced together for ages."

He was full of eagerness, a little flushed with the excitement of the evening, and her laughing protestations, her ridicule of him for wanting to dance with his mother, went for nothing. They only let loose on her a torrent of boyish persuasion, and finally she hesitated, laughed undecidedly, and yielded. She, too, was a little flushed and elated, as though with triumph.

"One turn, then, you absurd boy!" she said; and she let him draw her hand through his arm and lead her back into the dancing-room. They went only half-a-dozen times round the room in spite of his protestations against stopping, but Mrs. Romaine was too excellent a dancer and too striking a figure for those turns to pass unnoticed. When she stopped and made him take her, flushed and laughing, out of the room, she was instantly surrounded by a group of men vehemently reproaching her for dancing with her son to the exclusion of so many would-be partners, and laughingly denouncing Julian.

"I couldn't help it!" she protested gaily. "Yes, I know it's a ridiculous sight, but we are rather ridiculous, we two, you know! Come, Julian, take me home this moment! Let me disappear covered with confusion."

She went swiftly downstairs as she spoke, laughing prettily, and a few minutes later Julian, with a good deal of extraneous and wholly unnecessary assistance, was putting her into her carriage.

The whole evening had gone off admirably, Mrs. Romaine said the next morning; repeating the dictum with which she had parted from Julian at night, with less excitement, but with undiminished satisfaction.

During the course of the next three or four weeks that satisfaction—a certain genuine and deliberate satisfaction which seemed to underlie the superficial gaiety and brightness of her manner—seemed to grow upon her. The season had begun early, and very gaily, and she and Julian were in great request. It was perhaps as well that little work was expected of the embryo barrister before the winter, for he and his mother were out night after night; welcomed and made much

of wherever they went, as so attractive a pair—one of whom was steeped to the finger-tips in knowledge of her world—were sure to be. Mrs. Romaine arranged a series of weekly dinner-parties in the little house at Chelsea, which promised to be, in a small way, one of the features of the season. They were very small, very select, and very cheery; no better hostess was to be found in London, and there was a touch of sentiment about the relation between the hostess and the pleasant young host, which was by no means without charm for the guests.

Mrs. Halse's bazaar, too, which was affording far more entertainment to its promoters than it seemed at all likely to afford to its supporters, served to bring Julian into special prominence. He was not clever, but there is a great deal to be done in connection with a bazaar on which intellect would be thrown away, and Julian proved himself what Mrs. Halse described effusively as "a most useful dear!" an expression by which she probably meant to convey the fact that he was always ready to toil for the ladies' committee, without too close an investigation into the end to be attained by the said toiling. He was quite an important person at all the meetings connected with the bazaar, and the fact gave him a standing with the innumerable "smart" people concerned which he would otherwise hardly have attained so soon.

His introduction to Lord Garstin resulted, about a fortnight after it took place, in an invitation to a bachelor dinner. An invitation to one of Lord Garstin's dinners was, in its way, about as desirable a thing as a young man "in Society" could receive; and the pleased, repressed importance on Julian's face as he came into the drawing room to his mother before he started to keep the engagement, was like a faint reflection of the satisfaction with which Mrs. Romaine's expression was transfused.

"You're going?" she said brightly. "Well, I shall be at the Ponsonbys' by half past eleven, and I shall expect you there some time before twelve. Enjoy yourself, sir!"

He kissed her with careless affection, and she patted him on the shoulder for a conceited boy as he hoped, lightly, that she would not find her solitary evening dull; she had refused to dine out without him, saying laughingly that she should enjoy a holiday; and then he went off, whistling gaily and arranging his buttonhole.



It wanted a few minutes only to the dinner-hour when he arrived at the club where the dinner was to be given. Three of his fellow guests were already assembled, and to two of these—well-known young men about town—he had already been introduced.

"You know these two fellows, I think," said Lord Garstin lightly, "but"—turning to the third man—"Loring tells me that you and he have not yet been introduced. I'm delighted to perform the ceremony! Mr. Julian Romayne—Mr. Marston Loring!"

Julian held out his hand with a frank exclamation of pleasure. He had recognised in Mr. Marston Loring a young man whom he had seen about incessantly during the past month, and who had excited a good deal of secret and boyish admiration in him by reason of a certain assumption of *blasé* cynicism with which an excellent society manner was just sufficiently seasoned to give it character. It was conventional character enough, but it was not to be expected that Julian should understand that.

"I'm awfully glad to meet you," he said pleasantly. "I've known you by sight for ages!"

"And I you!" was the answer, spoken with a slight smile and a touch of cordiality which delighted Julian. "The pleasure is distinctly mutual."

Marston Loring was not a good-looking young man; his features, indeed, would have been insignificant but for the presence of that spurious air of refinement which life in society usually produces; and for something more genuine, namely, a strength and resolution about the mould of his chin and the set of his thin lips which had won him a reputation for being "clever looking" among the superficial observers of the social world. He was nine-and-twenty, but his face might have been the face of a man twenty years older—so entirely destitute was it of any of the gracious possibilities which should characterise early manhood. It was pale and lined, and worn with very ugly suggestiveness; and there were stories told about him, whispered and laughed at in many of the houses where he was received, which accounted amply for those lines. The pose, too, which it pleased him to adopt was that of elderly superiority to all the illusions and credulities of youth. Marston Loring was a man of whom it was vaguely but universally said that he had "got on so well!" Reduced to facts, this statement

meant, primarily, that with no particular rights in that direction he had gradually worked his way into a position in society—a position the insecurity and unreality of which was known only to himself; and, secondarily, that by dint of influence, hard work—hard work was also part of his pose—and a certain amount of unscrupulousness, he was making money at the bar when most men dependent on their profession would have starved at it.

He had brown eyes, dull and curiously shallow-looking, but very keen and calculating, and they were even keener than usual as they gave Julian one quick look.

"I think we belong to the same profession?" he said with easy friendliness. "You are reading with Allardyce, are you not? A good man, Allardyce."

"So they tell me," answered Julian, not a little impressed by the critical and experienced tone of the approbation. "I can't say I've done much with him yet. One doesn't do much at this time of year, you know."

Loring smiled rather sardonically.

"That's what it is to be a gentleman of independent fortune," he said. "Some people have to burn the candle at both ends."

The five minutes' chat which ensued before the arrival of the fifth guest—a certain Lord Hesseltine, known only by sight to Julian—and the announcement of dinner, was just enough to create a regret in Julian's mind when he found that he and his new acquaintance were seated on opposite sides of the table. Loring's contribution to the general conversation throughout dinner, witty, cynical, and assured, completed his conquest, and when, on the subsequent adjournment of the party to the smoking-room, Loring strolled up to him, cigar in hand, the prospect of a *tête-à-tête* was greatly to Julian's satisfaction.

"What an odd thing it is that we should never have been introduced before!" he began, lighting his own cigar and scanning the other man with youthful, admiring eyes.

"It is odd," returned Loring placidly, throwing himself into an arm-chair as he spoke, and signing an invitation to Julian to establish himself in another. "Especially as, like every one else, I've been an immense admirer of your mother all this year. I wonder whether you recognise what a lucky fellow you are, Romaine?"

Julian's eyes sparkled with pleasure at the easy familiarity of the address, and he crossed his legs with careless self-importance, as he answered, with the lightness of youth :

"I ought to, oughtn't I? I say, I know my mother would be awfully pleased to know you. You must let me introduce you to her. Are you coming on to the Ponsonbys' to-night?"

"I shall be only too delighted," answered Loring, watching the smoke from his cigar with his dull, brown eyes, and answering the first part of Julian's speech. "No, unfortunately I've got an affair in Chelsea to-night, and another in Kensington. But we shall meet to-morrow night at the Bracondales', I suppose?"

"Of course," assented Julian eagerly. "That will be capital!"

There was a moment's pause, broken by Loring with a reference to a political opinion formulated by one of the other men at dinner; and a talk about politics ensued, eager on Julian's part, cynical and effectively reserved on Loring's. A political discussion, when the discussers hold the same political faith, has much the same effect in promoting rapid intimacy between men, granted a predisposition towards intimacy on either side, as a discussion of the reigning fashion in dress has with a certain class of women. When Lord Garstin's dinner-party began to break up, and Loring and Julian rose to take their departure, they parted with a hand-clasp which would have befitted an acquaintanceship three months, rather than three hours old.

"Good night," said Julian. "Awfully pleased to have met you, Loring. See you to-morrow night. My mother will be delighted."

"I shall be delighted," said Loring. "All right, then. To-morrow night we'll arrange that look in at the House. Good night."

A few minutes' talk with Lord Garstin, who had taken a decided fancy to "that charming little woman's boy," and Julian was standing on the pavement of St. James's Street, with that pleasant sense of exhilaration and warmth of heart, which is an attendant, in youth, on the inauguration of a new friendship.

It was a night in early May, and a fine, hot day had ended, as evening drew on, in sultry closeness. The clouds had been rolling up steadily, though not a breath of air

seemed to be stirring now, and it was evident that a storm was inevitable before long. Julian was hot and excited; he had only a short distance to go; he looked up at the sky and decided—the wish being father to the thought—that it would “hold up for the present,” and that he would walk.

He set out up St. James's Street and along Piccadilly, taking the right road by instinct, his busy thoughts divided between satisfaction at the idea of belonging to the “best” club in London, introduced thereinto by Lord Garstin; and Loring and his gifts and graces. He had just turned into Berkeley Street when a rattling peal of thunder roused him with a start, and the next instant the thunder was followed by a perfect deluge of rain.

It was so sudden and he was so entirely unprepared, that his only instinct for the moment was to step back hastily into the shelter of a portico in front of which he was just passing; and as he did so, he noticed a young woman who must have been following him up the street, a young woman in the shabby hat and jacket of a work-girl, take refuge, perforce, beneath the same shelter with a shrinking movement which was not undignified, though it seemed to imply that she was almost more afraid of him than of the drenching, bitter rain. Then, his reasoning powers reasserting themselves in the comparative security of the portico, he began to consider what he should do. He was within seven minutes' walk of his destination, but seven minutes' walk in such rain as was beating down on the pavement before him would render him wholly unfit to present himself at a party; and “of course,” as he said to himself, there was not a cab to be seen. A blinding flash of lightning cut across his reflections, and drove him back a step or two farther into shelter involuntarily. And as a terrific peal of thunder followed it instantaneously, he glanced almost unconsciously at the sharer of his shelter.

“By Jove!” he said to himself.

The girl had retreated, as he himself had done, and was standing close up against the door of the house to which the portico belonged, in the extreme corner from that which he himself occupied. But except for that tacit acknowledgement of his presence, she seemed no longer conscious of it. She was looking straight out at the storm, her head a little lifted as though to catch a glimpse of the sky; and her face, outlined by her dark clothes and the dark paint of the door behind her,

stood out in great distinctness. It was rather thin and pale, and very tired-looking ; the large brown eyes were heavy and haggard. It was not worthy of a second glance at that moment, according to any canon of the world in which Julian lived, and yet it drew from him that exclamation of startled admiration. He had never seen anything like it, he told himself vaguely.

Apparently the intent gaze, of which he himself was hardly conscious, affected its object. She moved uneasily, and turning as if involuntarily, met his eyes.

The next instant she was moving hastily from under the portico, when the driver of a hansom cab became aware of Julian's existence, and pulled up suddenly.

"Hansom, sir?" he shouted.

"Yes!" answered Julian quickly, dashing across the drenched pavement. "A hundred and three, Berkeley Square!"

## CHAPTER X

ALL the rooms in the house in Chelsea were bright and pretty, and by no means the least attractive was the dining-room. The late breakfast-hour fixed by Mrs. Romaine, "just for the season," as she said, gave plenty of time for the sun to find its way in at the windows; and on the morning following Julian's dinner with Lord Garstin the sunshine was dancing on the walls, and the soft, warm air floating in at the open windows, as though the thunderstorm of the previous evening had cleared the air to some purpose.

The two occupants of the room, as they faced one another across the dainty little breakfast table, had been laughing and talking after their usual fashion ever since they sat down; talking of the party of the night before and of engagements in the future; and finally reverting to Lord Garstin's dinner and Marston Loring, of whom Julian had already had a great deal to say.

"I have a kind of feeling that he and I are going to be chums, mother!" he said as he carried his coffee cup round the table to her to be refilled. "I think he took to me rather, do you know!"

"That's a very surprising thing, isn't it?" returned his mother, laughing. "And you took to him? Well, if you must pick up a chum, you couldn't do it under better auspices than Lord Garstin's."

"I took to him no end!" answered Julian eagerly. "I do hope you'll like him."

"I think I am pretty sure to like him," said Mrs. Romaine graciously. "I remember hearing about him some time ago—that he was quite one of the rising young men of the day. He was to have been introduced to me then. I forget why it didn't come off. There's your coffee!"

Julian took his cup with a word of thanks and turned back to his chair; and his mother began again.

"Mr. Loring is a member of the Prince's, I suppose?" she said. The "Prince's" was the name of the club

at which Lord Garstin's dinner had been given. "I suppose you will want to be setting up a club in no time, sir?"

Julian laughed, and then replied somewhat eagerly and confidentially, as though in unconscious response to a certain invitation in his mother's tone.

"Well, of course a fellow does want a club, mother," he said. "One feels it more and more, don't you know! Of course I should awfully like to belong to the Prince's."

"And why not?" responded his mother brightly, watching him rather narrowly as she spoke. "Lord Garstin would put you up, I've no doubt, if I asked him."

Julian's eyes sparkled.

"It would be first rate!" he exclaimed. "Mother, it's awfully jolly of you!" He paused a moment and then continued tentatively: "It would be rather expensive, you know. That's the only thing!"

"So I suppose!" answered his mother, laughing. "Oh, you're a very expensive luxury altogether! However, I imagine another hundred a year would do?" Then as he broke into vehement demonstrations of delight and gratitude, she added with another laugh which did not seem to ring quite true: "I don't think you need ever run short of money!"

There was a moment's pause as Julian, the picture of glowing satisfaction, finished his breakfast, and then Mrs. Romaine rose.

"What are you going to do this morning?" she said. "Read?"

Julian glanced out of the window.

"Well," he said, "it's an awfully jolly morning, isn't it? I promised to see after some live-stock for Miss Pomeroy's stall—puppies, and kittens, and canary birds. Rum idea, isn't it? What are you doing this morning, dear?"

It turned out that Mrs. Romaine had nothing on her hands beyond a visit to a jeweller in Bond Street, and accepting very easily his substitution of Miss Pomeroy's commission for the legal studies to which he was supposed to devote himself in the mornings, she took up his reference to the weather, and suggested that they should drive together to execute first his business and then her own.

"It will be rather nice driving this morning," she said. "And we can take a turn in the Park."

Certainly there was a certain amount of excuse for those

people who had already begun to say that Mrs. Romaine was never happy without her son by her side.

She spared no pains, however, to make him happy with her; and as they drove along there was probably no brighter or brisker talk than theirs in progress in all London. They drove through the West End streets and penetrated, in search of Miss Pomeroy's requirements, into regions into which Mrs. Romaine had hardly ever penetrated before; regions which rather amused her to-day in their squalor. When Julian had done his commission in plenty of time to undo it and do it again before the bazaar came off, as he remarked with a laugh, they turned back again and went to Bond Street.

"I have a little private matter to attend to here," said Julian, as he followed his mother into the jeweller's shop. "You just have the kindness to stop at your end of the shop, will you, please, and leave me to mine?"

Mrs. Romaine laughed and shook her head at him. It was within a few days of her birthday, which was always demonstratively honoured by her son.

"Now, you are not to be extravagant," she said, holding up a slender, threatening finger with mock severity. "Mind, I will not have it. I shall descend upon you unawares, and keep you in order."

She let him leave her with another laugh, and he disappeared at the other end of the shop, while she followed a shopman to a counter near the door. Just turning away from it, she met Mrs. Pomeroy and her daughter.

"Now, this is really most delightful!" exclaimed Mrs. Pomeroy, if any speech so comfortable and so unexcited may be described as an exclamation. "It is always charming to see you, dear Mrs. Romaine, of course; but it really is particularly charming this morning, isn't it, Maud?"

"That's very nice," said Mrs. Romaine brightly, turning to Maud Pomeroy with a smile, and pressing the girl's hand with an affectionate familiarity developed in her with regard to Miss Pomeroy by the last few weeks. A hardly perceptible touch of additional satisfaction had come to her face as she saw the mother and daughter. "Please tell me why?"

"Yes, of course," said Mrs. Pomeroy placidly; she sat down as she spoke with that instinct for personal ease under all circumstances, which was her ruling characteristic. "That is just what I want to do. My dear Mrs. Romaine, it is the



bazaar, of course. It really is a most awkward thing, isn't it, Maud? It seems that we have asked twenty-one ladies—all most important—to become stall-holders, and we can't possibly make room for more than eighteen stalls! Now, what would you— Ah, Mr. Romaine, how do you do?"

Mrs. Pomeroy had broken off her tale of woe as placidly as she had begun it, and had greeted Julian with comfortable cordiality. He had come up hastily, not becoming aware of his mother's companions until he was close to them.

"This is awfully lucky for me!" he exclaimed. "I want a lady desperately for half a minute, and my mother won't do. Miss Pomeroy," turning eagerly to the demure, correct-looking figure standing by Mrs. Pomeroy's side, "will you come to the other end of the shop with me for half a minute? It would be awfully good of you."

The words were spoken in a tone of fashionable good fellowship—the pseudo good fellowship which passes for the real thing in society—which, as addressed by Julian Romaine to Miss Pomeroy and her mother, was one of the results of his work in connection with the bazaar; and before Miss Pomeroy could answer, Mrs. Romaine interposed. Somebody very frequently did interpose when Miss Pomeroy was addressed. No one ever seemed to expect opinions or decisions from her; perhaps because she was her mother's daughter; perhaps because of her curiously characterless exterior; while the fact that she had never been known to controvert a statement—in words—doubtless accentuated the tendency of her acquaintance to make statements for her.

"It will be awfully good of you," Mrs. Romaine said to her now, laughing, "if you are kind enough to help this silly fellow, to insist on his remembering that his mother will be very angry indeed if he is extravagant. I shall have to give up having a birthday, I think."

Then as Julian, with a gay gesture of repression to his mother, waited for Miss Pomeroy's answer with another pleading, "It would be ever so good of you," the girl, with a glance at her mother, said, with a conventional smile, "With pleasure," and walked away by his side.

Mrs. Pomeroy looked after Julian with an approving smile. He was a favourite of hers.

"Such a nice fellow," she murmured amiably; and Mrs. Romaine laughed her pretty, self-conscious laugh.

"So glad you find him so," she said. "Oh, by-the-bye, dear Mrs. Pomeroy, can you tell me anything about a Mr. Marston Loring? He goes everywhere, doesn't he? I think I have seen him at your house."

"Oh, yes," returned Mrs. Pomeroy, as placidly as ever, but with a decision which indicated that she was giving expression to a popular verdict, not merely to an opinion of her own. "He is quite a young man to know. Very clever, and rising. I don't know what his people were; he has been so successful that it really doesn't signify, you know. He lives in chambers—I don't remember where, but it is a very good address."

"Has he money?" asked Mrs. Romaine.

"I really don't know," said Mrs. Pomeroy. "He is doing extremely well at the bar. By the way, they say," and here-with Mrs. Pomeroy lowered her voice and confided to her interlocutor two or three details in connection with Marston Loring's private life—the life which in the world no one is supposed to recognise—which might have been considered by no means to his credit. They were not details which affected his society character in any way, however, and Mrs. Romaine only laughed with such slight affectation of reprobation as a woman of the world should show.

"Men are all alike, I suppose," she said, with that fashionable indulgence which has probably done as much as anything else towards making men "all alike." "By-the-bye, he was Lord Dunstan's best man, wasn't he?"

Mrs. Pomeroy was just confirming to Mr. Marston Loring what was evidently a certificate of social merit, when Julian and Miss Pomeroy reappeared, and Mrs. Romaine, with an exclamation at herself as a "frightful gossip," turned to the shopman, who had been waiting her pleasure at a discreet distance, and transacted her business.

"We haven't settled anything about this trying business of the twenty-one stall-holders," said Mrs. Pomeroy plaintively, as she finished. "Now, I wonder—we were thinking of taking a turn in the Park, weren't we, Maud?" Mrs. Pomeroy had a curious little habit of constantly referring to her daughter. "It would be so kind of you, dear Mrs. Romaine, if you would send your carriage home and take a turn with us, you and Mr. Romaine, and I would take you home, of course. I really am anxious to know what you advise, for there seems to

be an idea that I am in some way responsible for the awkwardness. So absurd, you know. I am quite sure I have only done as I was told."

Apparently it had not occurred to Mrs. Pomeroy that to do as you are told by four or five different people with totally different ends in view is apt to lead to confusion.

Mrs. Romaine fell in with the plan proposed, after an instant's demur, with smiling alacrity, and the "turn in the Park" that followed was a very gay one. Miss Pomeroy and Julian laughed and talked together—that is to say, Julian laughed and talked in the best of good spirits, and Miss Pomeroy put in just the correct words and pretty smiles which were wanted to keep his conversation in full swing. Mrs. Romaine and Mrs. Pomeroy, facing them, disposed of the difficulty in connection with the bazaar, after a good deal of irrelevant discussion, by saying very often, and in a great many words, that three more stalls must be got in somewhere; a decision which seemed to Mrs. Pomeroy to make everything perfectly right, although she had had it elaborately demonstrated to her that such a course was absolutely impossible.

It was half-past one when Mrs. Romaine and Julian were put down at their own door, and the barouche drove off amid a chorus of light laughter and last words. The sunshine, the fresh air, the movement, or something less simple and less physical, seemed to have had a most exhilarating effect on Mrs. Romaine. Her face was almost as radiant in its curiously different fashion as Julian's was radiant with the unreasoning good spirits of youth.

"Such nice people!" she said lightly. "I wonder whether lunch is ready? I'm quite starving! Oh, letters!" taking up three or four which lay on the hall-table. "Let us trust they are interesting!" She turned into the dining-room as she spoke, sorting the envelopes in her hand. "One for you—your friend Von Mühler, isn't it?" she said, tossing it to Julian carelessly. "One for me—an invitation obviously. One from Mrs. Ponsonby, about her stall, I suppose. And one from——"

She stopped suddenly. The last letter of the pile was contained in a small square envelope, and addressed in what was obviously a man's handwriting—a good handwriting, clear and strong, but somewhat cramped and precise. "Mrs. William Romaine, 22, Queen Anne Street, Chelsea." A curious stillness seemed to come over the little alert figure as

the pale blue eyes caught sight of the writing, and then Mrs. Romaine moved and walked slowly away to the window, still with her eyes fixed on the envelope. She paused a moment, and then she opened it and drew out a sheet of note-paper bearing a few lines only in the same small, clear hand.

"Well, mother, and what have your correspondents got to say? I have had no end of a screed from Von Mühler."

Nearly ten minutes had passed, and Mrs. Romaine started violently. She thrust the letter—still open in her hand, though she was looking fixedly out of the window—back into its envelope and turned. Her face had altered curiously and completely. All its colour, all the genuine animation which had pervaded it as she came into the room, had disappeared; it was pale and hard-looking, and the lines about the mouth and eyes were very visible.

"A dinner invitation from Lady Ashton," she said, "and a long rigmarole from Mrs. Ponsonby to tell me that she is resigning her stall, and why she is doing it. Poor Mrs. Pomeroy should be grateful to her!"

Her tone was an exaggeration of her bright carelessness of ten minutes before, forced and unnatural; her back was towards the window, or even Julian's boyish eyes might have noticed the stiff unreality of the smile with which she spoke.

They sat down to lunch together, but the strange change which had come to her did not pass away. Julian did most of the talking, though the readiness of her comments and her smiles—which left her lips always hard and set, and never seemed to touch her eyes—prevented his being in the least aware of the fact. Their afternoon was spent apart; but when they met again there was that about her face which made Julian say with some surprise:

"Are you tired, mother?"

They were going to a large dinner-party before the very smart "at home" to which Julian and Mr. Loring had referred on the previous evening as an opportunity for meeting, and Mrs. Romaine was magnificently dressed. There were diamonds round her throat and in her hair, and as they flashed and sparkled, seeming to lend glow and animation to her face as she laughed at him for a ridiculous boy, Julian thought carelessly that he must have imagined the drawn look which had struck him—though he had only recognised it as "tired-looking"—on his mother's face. As though his words had

startled or even annoyed her, she gave neither Julian nor any one else any further excuse for taxing her with fatigue. Throughout the long and rather dull dinner she was vivacity itself; her face always smiling, her laugh always ready. As the evening went on a flush made its appearance on her cheeks, as though the mental stimulus under which that gaiety was produced involved a veritable quickening of the pulses; and her son, when he met her in the hall after she had uncloaked for their second party, thought that he had never seen his mother look "jollier," as he expressed it.

"We must look out for Loring," he said eagerly. "Oh, there he is, mother, just inside the doorway! That clever-looking fellow, do you see, with a yellow buttonhole?"

It was easier to recognise an acquaintance than to approach within speaking distance of him; and some time elapsed, during which Mrs. Romaine and Julian exchanged greetings on all sides, and were received by Lady Bracondale, before they found themselves also just inside the doorway. Mrs. Romaine had given one quick, keen glance in the direction indicated by Julian, and then had become apparently oblivious of Mr. Marston Loring's existence until Julian finally exclaimed:

"Well met, Loring! Awfully pleased to see you! Mother, may I introduce Mr. Marston Loring?"

She turned her head then, and bent it very graciously, holding out her hand with her most charming smile.

"I have known you by sight for a long time, Mr. Loring!" she said. "I am delighted to make your acquaintance!"

"The delight is mine!" was the response, spoken with just that touch of well-bred deference which is never so attractive to a woman as when it is exhibited in conjunction with such a personality as Loring's. "It is one for which I have wished for a long time!"

"Seen the papers to-night?" interposed Julian eagerly. "We've lost Nottingham, you see!"

He was alluding to a bye-election which had led to the political discussion of the evening before, and Loring nodded.

"I see," said Loring. "Romaine has told you, no doubt," he went on, turning to Mrs. Romaine, "that we foregathered to a considerable extent last night over politics—and other things." The last words were spoken with a glance at the younger man which seemed to ascribe to their acquaintance an altogether more personal and friendly footing than political

discussion alone could have afforded it, and Mrs. Romaine laughed very graciously.

"Yes; he has told me!" she said. "I am rather thinking of getting a little jealous of you, Mr. Loring."

A few minutes' more talk followed—talk in which Loring bore himself with his usual cynical manner, just tempered into even unusual effectiveness—and then Mrs. Romaine prepared to move on.

"You must come and see us," she said to Loring. "Julian will give you the address. I am at home on Fridays; and I hope you will dine with us before long!"

She gave him a pretty nod and an "*au revoir*," and turned away.

"He's awfully jolly, isn't he, mother?" exclaimed Julian, as soon as they were out of earshot.

"Very good style," returned Mrs. Romaine approvingly. "He is just the kind of man to get on. You have a good deal of discrimination, sir," she added.

The mother and son were separated after that, and about half an hour later Mrs. Romaine caught sight of Julian disappearing with a very pretty girl, whose face she did not know, in the direction of the supper-room, just as she herself was greeted by Lord Garstin and pressed to repair thither.

"Thanks, no," she said lightly. "There is such a crowd, and I really don't want anything."

She paused. That accentuated vivacity was still about her, as she looked up at Lord Garstin with a little smile and a gesture which he thought unusually charming.

"I want a little chat with you, though, very much," she said with pretty confidence. "I'm going to ask you to give me some advice, do you know. Will it bore you frightfully?"

"On the contrary, it will delight me," was the ready and by no means insincere response.

Mrs. Romaine made a gracious and grateful movement of her head.

"I would rather take your opinion than that of any other man I know," she said confidentially. She stopped and laughed slightly. "It's about my boy, of course!" she said. "I want to know what you think of a club for a young man in his position? Do you think, now, that it is a good thing?"

"Emphatically, yes," returned Lord Garstin. "I consider a good club of the first importance to a young man. Your

young man ought to be a member of the Prince's." He paused a moment, looking at her as she nodded her head softly, waiting as though for further words of wisdom from him, and thought what a delightful little woman she was. "Suppose I talk to him about it?" he said pleasantly. "I will see to it with pleasure if you would like it."

Nothing, certainly, could have been more delightful than Mrs. Romaine's manner, as she spoke just the right words of graceful acknowledgement and acceptance. Then she made a gaily disparaging comment on club life, and Lord Garstin's advocacy of it, and a few minutes' bantering, laughing repartee followed—that society repartee of which Mrs. Romaine was a mistress. From thence she drifted into talk about the party, and a complaint of the heat of the room.

"It is time we were going, I think!" she remarked, with a gay little laugh. "But a mother is a miserable slave, you see! I am 'left until called for,' I suppose!"

"If I were not absolutely obliged to go myself," returned Lord Garstin, "I shouldn't encourage such a suggestion on your part. But as that is the case, unfortunately, shall I find your boy first and send him to you?"

Mrs. Romaine shook her head with another laugh.

"I saw him retire to the supper-room a little while ago with a very pretty girl," she said. "I make it a point never to hurry him under such circumstances! But if you should meet him you might tell him that I am quite ready when he is. Good night!"

The room was not by any means crowded now; it was getting late and a great many people were in the supper-room. The corner of the room in which Mrs. Romaine was standing happened to be nearly deserted; there was no one near her, and after Lord Garstin left her, she stood still, fanning herself and looking straight before her with her bright smile and animated expression rather stereotyped on her face. Suddenly, as if involuntarily, she turned her head; she looked across to the other side of the room and met the eyes of a man standing against the wall, who had been looking fixedly at her ever since Lord Garstin joined her. For an instant not the slightest perceptible change of expression touched her face; only the very absoluteness of its immobility suggested that that immobility was the result of a sudden and tremendous effort of self-control; then the colour faded slowly from her cheeks and

from her lips ; the smile did not disappear but it gradually assumed a ghastly appearance of being carved in marble ; her eyes widened slightly and became strangely fixed. The man was Dennis Falconer, and he and she were looking at one another across the gulf of eighteen years.

It was only for a moment. Then Mrs. Romaine, still quite colourless, lifted her eyebrows prettily and made a gesture of amazed recognition, and Falconer moved and came slowly towards her.

"What a surprising thing !" she exclaimed, holding out her hand. "I had no idea you were here to-night ! How do you do ? Welcome home !"

Her tone was perfectly easy and gracious ; so ultra-easy, indeed, that it deprived her words of any personal or emotional significance whatever, and relegated their meeting place with subtle skill to the most conventional of society grounds. The rather distinguished-looking man with the good reserved manner who stood before her accepted the position with grave readiness.

"Thank you," he said. He spoke with distant courtesy, about which there was not even the suggestion of that matter-of-course friendliness, as of distant kinship, which had made her reception of him nearly perfect as a work of art. "It is a great pleasure to me to be in England again."

"You have been away—let me see—two years ?" said Mrs. Romaine, with the vivacious assumption of intelligent interest which the social situation demanded. "Five, is it ? Really ? And you have done wonderful things, I hear. Funnily enough, I have been hearing about you only to-night. I must congratulate you."

He bent his head with a courteous gesture of thanks.

"You have had my note, I hope ?" he said. "You are settled in London now, Thomson tells me."

Thomson was the family lawyer, and he and Dennis Falconer himself were Mrs. Romaine's trustees under old Mr. Falconer's will.

"Oh, yes !" she answered suavely. "I had it to-day, just before lunch. So nice of you to write to me. Yes, we are settled ——"

She had been fanning herself carelessly throughout the short colloquy, glancing at Falconer or about the room with every appearance of perfect ease ; but now, as her eyes wandered to



the other end of the room something seemed to catch her attention. She hesitated, appeared to forget what she had intended to say, tried to recover herself, and failed.

Julian had come into the room, and was just parting gaily from some one in the doorway. Dennis Falconer did not take up her unfinished sentence; he followed the direction of her eyes across the room until his own rested upon Julian, and then he started slightly and glanced down at the woman by his side.

Mrs. Romayne laughed a rather high, unnatural laugh. She faced him with her eyes very hard and bright, and her lips smiling; and through all the artificiality of her face and manner there was something lurking in those hard, bright eyes as she did it, something not to be caught or defined, which made the movement almost heroic.

"You recognise him?" she said lightly. "Ridiculously like me, isn't he?"

At that moment Julian started across the room, evidently to come to his mother. He came on, stopping incessantly to exchange good-nights, laughing, bowing, and smiling; and, as though there were a fascination for them about his gay young figure, the man and woman standing together at the other end of the room watched him draw nearer and nearer. Words continued to come from Mrs. Romayne, a pretty, inconsequent flow of society chatter, but it no more tempered the strange gaze with which her eyes followed her son than did the unheeding silence with which Falconer received them as his grave eyes rested also on the young man. The whole thing was so incongruous; the expression of those two pair of eyes was so utterly out of harmony with their surroundings, and with the laughing, unconscious boy on whom they were fixed; that they seemed to draw him out from the brightly dressed, smiling groups through which he passed, and isolate him strangely in a weird atmosphere of his own.

"Here you are, sir!" cried his mother gaily, looking no longer at Julian as he stood close to her at last, but beyond him.

"Lord Garstin told me you were ready to go, dear," said Julian pleasantly. "I hope I haven't kept you?"

"There was no hurry," she answered, smiling; her voice was a little thin and strained. "We will go now, I think, but I want to introduce you first to some one whose name you know. This is your cousin, Dennis Falconer."

## CHAPTER XI

IT was a rather close afternoon in the third week of May. Fine weather had lasted without a break for more than a fortnight; for the last two or three days there had been little or no breeze; and the inevitable effect had been produced upon London. The streets were a combination of dust, which defied the water-carts; and glare, which seemed to radiate alike from the heavy, smoky-blue sky, the houses, and the pavements. It was only half-past three, and Piccadilly was as yet far from being crowded. The pavement was mainly occupied by the working population, which hurries to and fro along the London streets from morning to night regardless of fashionable hours; and the few representatives of the non-working class—smartly-dressed women and carefully got-up and sauntering men—stood out with peculiar distinctness. But the figure of Dennis Falconer, as he walked westward along the north side of Piccadilly, was conspicuous not only on these rather unenviable terms.

At the first glance it would have seemed that the past eighteen years had altered him considerably, and altered him always for the better; analysed carefully, the alteration resolved itself into a very noticeable increase of maturity and of a certain kind of strength; and the improvement into the fact that his weak points were of a kind to be far less perceptible as such on a mature than on a immature face. His face was thin and very brown; there were worn lines about it which told of physical endurance; and in the sharper chiselling of the whole the thinness of the nose and the narrowness of the forehead were no longer striking. The somewhat self-conscious superiority of his younger days had disappeared under the hand of time, and a certain sternness which had replaced it seemed to give dignity to his expression. The keen steadiness of his eyes had strengthened, and, indeed, it was their expression which helped in a very great degree to make his face so noticeable. He no longer wore a beard, and the firm, square outline of his chin and jaw was visible, while his mouth was hidden by a moustache; iron-grey like his hair,

He was very well dressed, but there was that about the simple conventionality of his attire which suggested that its correctness was rather a concession to exterior demands than the expression of personal weakness.

More than one of the people who turned their heads to look at him as he walked down Piccadilly were familiar with that grave, stern face; it had been reproduced lately in the pages of all the illustrated papers, and people glanced at it with the interest created by the appearance in the flesh of something of a celebrity. Falconer had done a great deal of good work for the Geographical Society in the course of the past eighteen years; work characterised by no brilliancy or originality of intellectual resource, but eminently persevering, conscientious, and patient. During the last year, however, a chapter of accidents had conspired to invest the expedition of which he was the leader with a touch of romance and excitement with which his personality would never have endued it. The achievement in which the expedition had resulted had been hailed in England as a national triumph, and Dennis Falconer found himself one of the lions of the moment.

But the position, especially for a man who believed himself to attach no value whatever to it, had been somewhat dearly bought. Falconer, as he walked the London streets on that May afternoon, was trying to realise himself as at home in them, settled among them, perhaps, for an indefinite period; and the effort brought an added shade of gravity to his face. The terrible physical strain of the last six months; a strain the severity of which he had hardly realised at the time, as he endured from day to day with the simple, unimaginative perseverance of a man for whom nerves have no existence; had told even upon his iron constitution; and a couple of great London doctors had condemned him to a year's inactivity at least, under penalties to grave too be provoked.

He turned down Sloane Street, and another quarter of an hour brought him to number twenty-two, Queen Anne Street. He rang, was admitted, and ushered upstairs into the drawing-room.

The room was empty, and Falconer walked across it, glancing about him with those keen, habitually observant eyes of his, and on his face there was something of the stiffness and reserve which had characterised his voice a minute earlier as he asked for Mrs. Romaine.

Until the night, now nearly a fortnight ago, when they had met in Lady Bracondale's drawing-room, Dennis Falconer had seen Mrs. Romaine only once since their journey from Nice had ended in old Mr. Falconer's house. That one occasion had been his visit to his uncle—so called—in his Swiss home in the second year of Mrs. Romaine's widowhood.

He had been in Europe several times since then and had always made a point of visiting old Mr. Falconer, but on every subsequent occasion it had happened—rather strangely, as he had thought to himself once or twice—that Mrs. Romaine was away from home. After old Mr. Falconer's death communication between them occurred only at the rarest intervals. Dennis Falconer was Mrs. Romaine's only remaining relation, and in this capacity had been left by her uncle one of her trustees; but any necessary business was transacted by his fellow trustee—old Mr. Falconer's lawyer. But the clan instinct was very strong in Falconer; it brought in its wake a whole set of duties and obligations which for most men are non-existent; and the sense of duty which had been characteristic of him in early manhood had only been more deeply—and narrowly—engraved by every succeeding year.

Arrived in London, and knowing Mrs. Romaine to be settled there, he had considered it incumbent on him to call on her, and had written the note which she had received nearly a fortnight ago. He had written it with much the same expression on his face—only a little less pronounced, perhaps—as rested on it now that he was waiting for Mrs. Romaine in her own drawing-room. Through all the changes brought about by the passing of eighteen years, the mental attitude produced in him towards Mrs. Romaine during those weeks of dual solitude at Nice had remained almost untouched, except inasmuch as its disapproval had been accentuated by everything he had heard of her since. It had been vivified and rendered, as it were, tangible and definite by the short interview at Lady Bracondale's party, which had made her a reality instead of a remembrance to him.

He was standing before a large and very admirable photograph of Julian—Julian at his very best and most attractive—contemplating it with a heavy frown, when the door behind him opened under a light, quick touch, and Mrs. Romaine came into the room.

"It is too shocking to have kept you waiting!" she said,

"So glad to see you! I gave myself too much shopping to do, and I have had quite a fearful rush!"

Her voice and manner were very easy, very conventionally cordial; and, as it seemed to Falconer, there was not a natural tone or movement about her. It was her "at home" afternoon, and she was charmingly dressed in something soft and pale-coloured; her eyes were very bright, and the play of expression on her face was even more vivacious and effective than usual—exaggeratedly so, even.

She shook hands and pointed him to a seat, sinking into a chair herself with an affectation of hard-won victory over the "fearful rush"; the subtle assumption of the most superficial society relation as alone existing between them was as insidious and as indefinable as it had been on their previous meeting, and seemed to set the key-note of the situation even before she spoke again.

"It is a frightful season!" she said. "Really horribly busy! They say it is to be a short one—I am sure I trust it is true, if we are any of us to be left alive at the end—and everything seems to be crammed into a few weeks. Don't you think so? You are very lucky to have arrived half-way through."

"London just now does not seem to be a particularly desirable place, certainly," answered Falconer; his manner was very formal and reserved, a great contrast to her apparent ease.

"No!" she said, lifting her eyebrows with a smile. "Now, that sounds rather ungrateful in you, do you know, for London finds you a very desirable visitor. One hears of you everywhere."

"I am afraid I must confess that I take very little pleasure in going 'everywhere,'" returned Falconer stiffly. "Social life in London seems to me to have altered for the worse in every direction, since I last took part in it."

"And yet you go out a great deal!" with a laugh. "That sounds a trifle inconsistent!"

"I am not sufficiently egotistical to imagine that my individual refusal to countenance it would have any effect upon society," answered Falconer, still more stiffly. "To tolerate is by no means to approve."

Falconer's reasons for the toleration in question—the real reasons, of which he himself was wholly unconscious—would have astonished him not a little, if he could have brought

himself to realise them, in their narrow conventionality. Fortunately it did not occur to Mrs. Romaine to ask for them. With the ready tact of a woman of the world she turned the conversation with a gracefully worded question as to his recent expedition. He answered it with the courteous generality—only rather more gravely spoken—with which he had answered a great many similar questions put to him during the past week by ladies to whom he had been introduced in his capacity of momentary celebrity; and she passed on from one point to another with the superficial interest evoked by one of the topics of the hour. Her exaggerated comments and questions, more or less wide of the mark, were exhausted at length, and a moment's pause followed; a fact that indicated, though Falconer did not know it, that the preceding conversation had involved some kind of strain on the bright little woman who had kept it up so vivaciously. The pause was broken by Falconer.

"You have heard," he said, "of poor Thomson's illness?"

It would hardly be true to say that Mrs. Romaine started—even slightly—but a curious kind of flush seemed to pass across her face. As she answered, both her voice and her manner seemed instinctively to increase and emphasize that distance which she had tacitly set between them; it was as though the introduction into the conversation of a name their mutual familiarity with which represented mutual interests and connections had created the instinct in her.

"Yes, poor man!" she said carelessly. "There has been a good deal of illness about this season, somehow."

"I am afraid it is a bad business," went on Falconer, with no comprehension of the turn she had given to the conversation, and with his mental condemnation of what seemed to him simple heartlessness on her part not wholly absent from his voice. "There was to be a consultation to-day; and I shall call this evening to hear the result. But I am afraid there is very slender hope."

"How very sad!" said Mrs. Romaine with polite interest.

Falconer bent his head in grave assent, and then with a view to arousing in her shallow nature—as it seemed to him—some remembrance at least of the usefulness to her of the man whose probable death she contemplated so carelessly, he said with formal courtesy:

"Thomson has done all the work connected with our

joint trusteeship so admirably hitherto that there has been no need for my services. But if, while he is ill, you should find yourself in want of his aid in that capacity, I need not say that I am entirely at your command."

Again that curious flush passed across Mrs. Romaine's face, leaving it rather pale this time.

"Thanks, so much!" she said quickly. "I really could not think of troubling you. I've no doubt I shall be able to hold on until Mr. Thomson is well again. Thanks immensely! You will not be within reach for very long, I suppose?"

"I shall be in London for a year, certainly," answered Falconer, acknowledging her tacit refusal to recognise any claim on him in the formal directness of his reply. Then, as she uttered a sharp little exclamation of surprise, he added briefly: "I am in the doctors' hands, unfortunately. There is something wrong with me, they say."

"I am very sorry——" she began prettily, though her eyes were rather hard and preoccupied. But at that moment the door opened to admit an influx of visitors, and Falconer rose to go.

"So glad to have seen you!" she said as she turned to him after welcoming the new-comers. "You won't have a cup of tea? It is always rather crushing when a man refuses one's tea, isn't it, Mrs. Anson?" turning as she spoke to a lady sitting close by. Then as she gave him her hand, speaking in a tone which still included the other lady in the conversation, she alluded for the first time to Julian. The whole call had gone by without one of those references to "my boy" with which all Mrs. Romaine's acquaintances were so familiar, that such an omission under the circumstances would have been hardly credible to any one of them.

"I'm so sorry you have missed my boy!" she said now with her apologetic laugh. "I'm afraid I am absurdly proud of him—isn't that so, dear Mrs. Anson?—but he really is a dear fellow."

"He is going to the bar, I believe?" said Falconer; his face and voice alike were uncompromisingly stern and unbending.

"Yes!" answered Julian's mother. "He is not clever, dear boy, but I hope he may do fairly well. Good-bye! Shall you be at the Gordons' to-night? We are going first to see the American actor they rave about so. A funny little domestic party—I and my son and my son's new and particular 'chum.' Good-bye!"

Mrs. Romaine's face did not regain its normal colour as she turned her attention to her other callers, nor did those faint lines about her mouth and eyes disappear. She was particularly charming that afternoon, but always, as she welcomed one set of visitors or parted from another, laughing, talking or listening so gaily, there was a faint, hardly definable air of preoccupation about her. She had a great many visitors, and the afternoon grew hotter as it wore on. When she dressed for dinner that night, finding herself strangely nervous, irritable with her maid, and "on edge altogether," as she expressed it, she was very definite and distinct in her self-assurances that such an unusual state of things was owing solely to the heat and "those tiresome people"; rather unnecessarily distinct and explicit it would have seemed, since there was apparently no chance of contradiction.

The acquaintanceship between Julian and Marston Loring had developed during the past fortnight with surprising rapidity. They had dined together at the club, they had smoked together in Loring's chambers, and they had met incessantly at dances, "at homes," or dinners, on all of which occasions Mrs. Romaine had been uniformly gracious to her son's friend.

At a garden-party a few miles out of London, admittedly the greatest failure of the season, when Loring and the Romaines had walked about together all the afternoon with that carelessness of social obligations which a dull party is apt to engender, the scheme for the present evening had been arranged; Loring adding a preliminary dinner at a restaurant, with himself in the capacity of host to Mrs. Romaine and her son, to the original suggestion that they should go together to the theatre.

Julian was in high spirits as they drove off to keep their engagement, but his mother's responses to his chatter were neither so ready nor so bright as usual. He glanced at her once or twice and then said boyishly:

"You look awfully done up, mother!"

Mrs. Romaine turned to him quickly, her eyes sparkling angrily, her whole face looking irritable and annoyed.

"My dear Julian," she said sharply, "it's a very bad habit to be constantly commenting on people's appearance; especially when your remarks are uncomplimentary. You told me I looked tired the other day. Please don't do it again!"

Such an ebullition of temper was an almost unheard-of



thing with Mrs. Romaine, and Julian could only stare at her in helpless astonishment—not hurt, but simply surprised, and inclined to be resentful. He could not realise as a woman might have done the jarred, quivering state of nerves implied in such an outbreak; and he simply thought his mother was rather odd, when a moment later she stretched out her hand hastily, and laid it on his with a quick, tight squeeze.

"That was abominably cross, dear!" she said in a voice which shook. "Don't mind! I am all right now."

But she was not all right, and though she made a valiant effort to collect her forces and appear so, her gaiety throughout dinner was strained and forced. Loring's quick perception realised instantly that something was wrong with her, and his demeanour under the circumstances was significant at once of the work of the past fortnight, and of his individual capacity for turning everything to his own ends. With a tacit assumption of a certain right to consider her, he evinced just such a delicate appreciation of her mood as gave her a sense of rest and soothing, without letting her feel for a moment that he found anything wanting in her. His pose was always that of a man to whom youth or even early manhood, with its follies and inexperience, is a thing of the dim past, and he used that pose now to the utmost advantage; combining a mental equality with the mother with an actual equality with the son as his contemporary in a manner which made him seem in a very subtle way equally the friend of each. He talked, of course, almost exclusively to Mrs. Romaine, never, however, failing to include Julian in the conversation; and he so managed the conversation as to take all its trouble on his own shoulders, and give Mrs. Romaine little to do but listen and be entertained.

He succeeded so well that the dinner-hour, by the time it was over, had done the work of many days in advancing his dawning intimacy with Mrs. Romaine.

She felt better, she told herself as they entered the theatre—told herself with rather excessive eagerness and satisfaction, perhaps because of something within, of which the quick, nervous movement of her hands as she unfastened her cloak was the outward and visible sign.

The curtain was just going up as they seated themselves, and during the first quarter of an hour the two seats to their left remained empty. Then Mrs. Romaine, whose attention was by no means chained to the stage, became aware of the

slow and difficult approach of a flow of loudly-whispered and apologetic conversation, combined with the large person of a lady; and a moment or two later she was being fallen over by Mrs. Halse, who was followed by a girl, and who continued to explain the situation fluently and audibly, until a distinct expression of the opinion of the pit caused her to subside temporarily.

She began to talk again before the applause on the fall of the curtain had died away, and her voice reached Mrs. Romaine, to whom her remarks were addressed, across the girl who was with her, and Julian, who was sitting on his mother's left hand, with gradually increasing distinctness.

"So curious that our seats should be together!" were the first words Mrs. Romaine heard. "I have just been meeting a connexion of yours. The explorer, you know—Dennis Falconer. So fascinating! Oh, by-the-bye—my cousin. I don't think she has had the pleasure of being introduced to you, though she has met your son. Miss Hilda Newton—Mrs. Romaine."

Miss Hilda Newton was a very pretty, dark girl of a somewhat pronounced type. She had large, perceptive, black eyes, singularly unabashed; a charming little turned-up nose; and a rather large mouth with a good deal of shrewd character about it. She was understood to be a country cousin of Mrs. Halse's, with whom she had been staying for the last three weeks; but only a very critical and rather unkind eye could have traced the country cousin in her dress, which had a great deal of style and dash about it. She acknowledged Mrs. Halse's introduction of her with rather excessive self-possession, and after a casual word or two to Mrs. Romaine, addressed herself to Julian; it was she with whom he had disappeared to supper at Lady Bracondale's "at home," and they had evidently seen a good deal of one another in the interval.

Mrs. Romaine had noticed them together more than once, and she had taken a dislike to Miss Newton's pretty, independent face and manners. In her present mood it was an absolute relief to her to find in the girl a legitimate excuse for irritation, and a reason for the fact that Mrs. Halse's speech had somehow undone all the work of the early part of the evening, and set her nerves on edge afresh.

"Detestably bad style!" she said to herself angrily, giving an unheeding ear to Mrs. Halse as she watched Miss Newton reply with a little twirl of her fan to an eager question of

Julian's. "Just what one would expect in a cousin of that woman." Then she became aware that "that woman" was vociferously insisting on changing places with Julian, and that Julian was acceding to the proposition with considerable alacrity; and before she had well realised exactly what the change involved, Mrs. Halse, with much paraphernalia of smelling-bottle, fan, opera-glasses, and programme, was established at her side, and Julian and Miss Newton were seated together at the end of the row, practically isolated by the stream of Mrs. Halse's conversation.

"So horrid to talk across people, isn't it?" said that lady airily, though no crowd ever collected would have interfered with her flow of language. "This is much more comfortable. My dear Mrs. Romaine, I am simply dying to rave to somebody about your cousin—he is your cousin, isn't he?—Mr. Falconer, you know. What a splendid man! Of course all the accounts of his work have been most fascinating, but the man himself makes it all seem so much more real, don't you know. Now, do tell me, is he your first cousin, and do you remember him when he was quite a little boy, and all that sort of thing?"

Mrs. Romaine took up her fan and unfurled it. She was looking past Mrs. Halse at Julian and Miss Newton, who were looking over the same programme with their heads rather close together. Her eyebrows were slightly contracted, and her eyes very bright, and the restless movements of the slender hand that held the fan seemed to be an expression of intense inward irritation.

"Oh dear, no; Dennis Falconer is not my first cousin, by any means!" she said carelessly, though her voice was a trifle sharp. "Third or fourth, or something of that kind."

"He is quite a hero, isn't he?" said Mrs. Halse, gushingly addressing Loring. "Have you met him?"

Loring, though his glance had every appearance of perfect carelessness, was watching Mrs. Romaine intently. He had noticed her access of nervous irritability, and he was curious as to the cause. Was it her son's flirtation with Miss Newton? Was it dislike to Mrs. Halse? Or had it any connection with Dennis Falconer? He had his reasons for a study of Mrs. Romaine's idiosyncrasies.

"Yes," he said. "I met him the other night. A good sort of fellow he seemed."

"He's magnificent!" said Mrs. Halse enthusiastically.

"We must have him at the bazaar, my dear Mrs. Romaine; that I am quite determined. If he would sell African trophies for us, you know—a native's tooth, or poppy-heads—oh, arrow-heads, is it?—well, anything of that sort—it would be a fortune to us! Have you seen a great deal of him? Cousins are so often just like brothers and sisters, are they not?"

A low laugh and a toss of her head from Miss Newton at this moment closed the perusal of the programme, and Julian turned his attention to perusing the pretty black eyes instead. Mrs. Romaine's lips seemed to tighten and whiten, and the fingers which held the fan were tightly clenched as she answered in a voice which rang hard in spite of her efforts:

"Sometimes they are, of course. But it depends so much on circumstances. Dennis Falconer and I had not met for years until the other day."

At that moment the curtain went up, leaving Mrs. Halse literally with her mouth open, and the instant it fell Mrs. Romaine leant across to Miss Newton with a comment on the performance, spoken in a rather thin, tense voice, and with eyes that glittered as though the nervous strain under which the speaker was labouring was becoming almost insupportable. Apparently something in her face repelled the girl, for her answer was of the briefest, and Julian throwing himself into the breach, he and Miss Newton were instantly absorbed in an animated discussion. It was a long wait, and Loring, noting every one of the restless movements of the woman by his side as she talked and laughed so sharply, understood that to Mrs. Romaine every moment meant nervous torture. The instant the green curtain fell on the third act she rose, and Loring followed her example, and wrapped her quickly and deftly in her cloak.

"I can't say I think much of your American prodigy," she said to him with a forced laugh. "I must confess that he has bored me to such an extent that I really can't stand any more boredom, and shall go straight home. Julian!"

She glanced round for him as she spoke, but he was escorting Mrs. Halse and her cousin, and she was waiting for him in her brougham before he joined her.

"Suppose you come to the club with me?" suggested Loring carelessly, as Julian received his mother's announcement of her intentions rather blankly. "What do you say to a game of billiards?"

"All right," responded Julian. "Thanks, old fellow. It

was only that I told Miss Newton we were coming on. Isn't she a jolly girl, mother?"

Mrs. Romaine smiled.

"Very pretty indeed," she said lightly. "It's a sad pity you're such an ineligible fellow, isn't it?"

And Loring, as the carriage drove off, said to himself admiringly: "What a wonderfully clever woman!"

Reaction from a heavy strain—even, apparently, if it is only the strain of combating exhaustion engendered by heat—is a terrible thing. When Mrs. Romaine got out of her carriage after her long drive, her face was haggard and drawn. She passed into the house, gathered up mechanically, and without a glance, two letters waiting for her on the hall-table; told the maid who was waiting for her that she might go to bed, and went up into the drawing-room.

There was a low chair by a little table covered with dainty, useless paraphernalia, which she particularly affected. She sat down in it now, almost unconsciously as it seemed, without even loosening her cloak, and with a long, low sigh; the moments passed, and still she sat there, a curious grey pallor about her face, her eyes gazing straight before her as though they were looking into the future or the past. At last, as if by a sudden fierce effort of will, she roused herself and began to tear open the letters still in her hand as if with a desperate instinct towards occupying her thoughts.

Her eyes fell on the letter by this time open in her hand, and she read it almost unconsciously, taking in the sense gradually as she read:

"DEAR COUSIN HERMIA,

"I have just heard to my great sorrow of the death of our old friend Thomson, and I think it right to let you know of it. I believe I need not remind you that on any future occasion on which the help of your now, unfortunately, sole trustee may be necessary, you will find me entirely at your service.

"Faithfully yours, DENNIS FALCONER."

With a sudden fierce gesture, of which her small white fingers looked hardly capable, Mrs. Romaine crushed the letter in her hand and lifted her head.

"To be thrown upon him!" she said in a curious, breathless tone. "To have to come into contact—close contact, personal contact—with him!"

## CHAPTER XII

THE season, as Mrs. Romaine had told Dennis Falconer, was to be a short one, and its proceedings were apparently to be regulated on the old principle of a short life and a merry one. Gaieties overtook one another in too rapid succession, and an unusually sunny and breezy May and June, with the inevitable action of such weather on human beings, even under the most artificial conditions, rendered these gaieties a shade more really gay than usual.

The atmosphere was not, again, so close as it had been on the afternoon when Dennis Falconer called on Mrs. Romaine, and it is presumable that the weather must have been responsible for her general unusualness of mood on the evening of that day; for if she was not quite herself on the following morning, the touch of self-compulsion in her brightness was so slight as to be hardly perceptible, and a day or two later it had entirely disappeared.

Certainly if constant stir and movement are conducive to good spirits, there was nothing wonderful in Mrs. Romaine's satisfaction with life. For she had not, as she complained laughingly, a single moment to herself.

"It's a regular treadmill!" she exclaimed gaily one day to Lord Garstin. "I had really forgotten what a terrible thing a London season was!"

"It seems to agree with you," was the answer. "There is one lady of my acquaintance, and only one, who seems to grow younger every day!"

"You can't mean me," she laughed. "I assure you, I am growing grey with incessantly running after that boy of mine! He is as difficult to catch as any lion of the season. I never see him except at parties!"

Julian's intimacy with Marston Loring had grown apace, and it had led to sundry social consequences which were, his mother said, "so good for him." Little dinners at the club, to which he had been duly elected; dinners at which he was now guest, now host; jovial little bachelor suppers made up among the very best "sets." Loring himself was very careful—though

he knew better than to make his care perceptible, except in its results—never to allow himself to be placed in the position of a rival to Mrs. Romaine for her son's time and company. He lost no opportunity of making himself useful and agreeable to Mrs. Romaine; now using pleasantly arrogated rights as Julian's friend; now his superior brain-power and knowledge of the world; until he gradually assumed the position of friend of the house. But club life necessarily created in Julian interests apart from his mother—interests which she was apparently well content that he should have, so long as his ever-ready chatter to her on the subject revealed that they were all connected with good "sets."

It was furthermore a season of very pretty *débutantes*, a large majority of whom elected to look upon Mr. Romaine as "such a nice boy," and to exact—or permit—any amount of slavery from him in the matters of fetching and carrying and general attendance. "You're known to be so profoundly ineligible, you see!" his mother would say to him, laughing. "Nobody is in the least afraid of you, poor boy!" And she looked on with perfect calmness as he danced, and rode, and did church parade; looked on with a calmness which might have been mistaken for indifference, but for the significant fact that she always knew which of his "jolly girls" was in the ascendant for the moment.

Miss Newton had gone home on the day following the meeting at the theatre.

Falconer was to be seen about throughout the season, making his grave concession to the weaknesses of society. Mrs. Romaine and Julian met him constantly, and he was asked to, and attended, the most formal of the dinners given at Queen Anne Street. But the intercourse between him and his "connexion," as Mrs. Romaine called herself, was of the most distant and non-progressive type. Julian did not take to him at all. "He is such a solemn fellow, mother!" he said. "He seems to think that I'm doing something wrong all the time." An observation to which Mrs. Romaine replied by laughing a rather forced laugh and changing the conversation.

The last event of the season, as it became evident as the weeks ran on, would be the bazaar in aid of Mrs. Halse's discovery among charities. It was, perhaps, as well that the institution in question was by no means in such-urgent need of patronage as might have been argued from Mrs. Halse's

demeanour towards it earlier in the proceedings ; for that lady's enthusiasm on the subject had suffered severely in the contest with the numerous other enthusiasms which had succeeded it, and the affairs of the bazaar had been pursued by all its supporters with energy which is most charitably to be described as intermittent. Three separate dates had been fixed for the opening day ; and, after a great deal of money had been spent in printing and advertising, each of these in succession had had to be abandoned owing to the singular incompleteness of every fundamental arrangement—though, as Mrs. Halse observed impatiently, after the third postponement, there were “heaps and heaps of Chinese lanterns.” Finally it was announced for the fifth and sixth of July ; and owing to herculean efforts on the part of half-a-dozen unfortunate men enlisted in the cause ; who apparently braced themselves to the task with a desperate sense that if the affair was not somehow or another carried through now, by fair means or foul, they were doomed to struggle in a tumultuous sea of fashionable feminine futility for the remainder of their miserable lives ; on the fifth the bazaar was actually opened.

It was late in the evening of that eventful day, and in various fashionable drawing-rooms exhausted ladies stretched on sofas were recruiting their forces after their severe labours. It had been the fashion for the last week or more among the prospective stall-holders to allude to the fatigue before them with resigned and heroic sighs of awful import ; consequently they were now convinced to a woman that they were in the last stages of exhaustion. As a matter of fact it is doubtful whether out of the sensations of all the “smart” helpers concerned—with the exception of the devoted half-dozen before mentioned, who had retired to various clubs in a state of collapse—a decent state of fatigue could have been constructed ; and the reason for this was threefold. In the first place, so much money had been spent in announcing the dates when the bazaar did not take place, that there was exceedingly little forthcoming to announce the date when it did take place ; consequently its attractive existence remained almost unknown to the general public, and the services of the sellers were in very slight demand. In the second place, the greater part of the work which could not be done by proxy was left undone. And in the third place, each lady had been throughout the day so deeply convinced of the “frightfully tiring” nature of



her occupation, that she thought it only her duty to "save herself" whenever that course was open to her—which was almost always.

In the drawing-room at Chelsea, very cool and pretty with its open windows and its plentiful supply of flowers and ferns, Mrs. Romaine was lying on the sofa, as the exigencies of the moment, socially speaking, demanded of her, in an attitude of graceful weariness; an attitude which was rather belied by the alert expression of her contented face. She had dined at home—"just a quiet little dinner, you know—cold, because goodness knows when we shall get it!"—with Julian and Loring at half-past seven. The bazaar did not close until nine, but all the principal stall-holders had thought it their duty to the following day not to wear themselves quite out, and had left the last two hours to the care of one or other of the hangers-on, of whom "smart" women may usually have a supply if they choose; and Mrs. Romaine's quiet little dinner was only one of a score of similar functions, very dainty and luxurious in view of the tremendous exertions which had preceded them, which were being held in various fashionable parts of London. At ten o'clock Loring had taken his leave, declaring sympathetically that Mrs. Romaine must long for perfect quiet after her exertions. It was then that Mrs. Romaine had betaken herself to her sofa and her papers.

"What an immense time it is since we have had such a domesticated hour!"

Mrs. Romaine had laid down her literature some moments before, and had been lying looking at Julian with that curious expression in her eyes which would creep into them now and again when they rested on the good-looking young figure, and which harmonised so ill with the shallow, vivacious prettiness of the rest of her face. She spoke, however, with her usual light laugh at herself, and Julian laughed too as he threw down his magazine and turned towards her.

"It is an age, isn't it?" he said.

During the final agony of preparation for the bazaar, Julian had been in immense request. Not that he was one of the devoted half-dozen, or that he did much definite work; but he was always ready to discuss any lady's private fad with her for any length of time, and to rush all over London about nothing. His exertions, and the exhaustion engendered thereby, had rendered necessary a great deal of recreation at the club. He

had repaired thither very frequently of late, instead of escorting his mother home on the conclusion of their tale of parties for the night.

"It is a comfort to think that it is so nearly over!" observed Mrs. Romaine carelessly. It is never worth while, in the world in which Mrs. Romaine moved, to express more than half your meaning in words, and Julian quite understood that she alluded, not to the domestic hour, but to the season. Her words were not prompted by any actual weariness of the round of life she characterised as "it," but the sentiment was in the air—the fashionable air, that is to say. She and Julian, in common with the greater part of their world, were leaving London at the end of the week.

"It has been awfully jolly!" said Julian, leaning back in his chair and resting his head against his loosely locked hands. "I had no idea life was such a first-rate business!"

His mother smiled, and there was a strange touch of triumph in her smile.

"It is a first-rate business," she assented, "if one lives it among the right people and in the right position. I imagine you see by this time that it isn't much use otherwise!"

He laughed as though his appreciation of her words rendered them almost a truism to him, and there was a moment's silence. It was broken by Julian.

"It costs a lot of money," he said, in a casual, indefinite way, but with a quick glance at his mother.

"Well, it isn't cheap, certainly," was the laughing answer; "but I think we shall manage." Then noticing something a little deprecating about his pose and expression, Mrs. Romaine added, with mock reprehension, "You're not going to ask me to raise your allowance, you extravagant boy?"

Julian moved, and leaning forward, clasped his hands round one knee as if the uncomfortable and transitory pose assisted explanation. He laughed back at her, but he was looking nevertheless somewhat ashamed of himself.

"No, it's not that—exactly," he began rather lamely. "It's a splendid allowance, mother dear, and I'm no end grateful; but the fact is, there has been a good deal of card-playing lately at the club. I don't care for cards, you know, but one must play a bit, and I have been rather a fool. Look here, dear, I suppose—I suppose you couldn't let me have two hundred, could you—before we go away, you know?"

"Two hundred, Julian! My dear boy!"

There was a strong tone of surprise and remonstrance in Mrs. Romaine's voice, and there was also a very distinct note of annoyance; but all these sentiments seemed rather to apply to the demand, which was apparently unseasonable, than to the desirability of the transaction. She was neither startled nor distressed.

"It is young Fordyce, mother," continued her son deprecatingly. "It was awfully foolish to play with him, he's so beastly lucky. And you see I must settle it before I go away."

"And have you none of your own?" demanded his mother, with some asperity in her tone. Julian's creditor was a young man who had the reputation of being a "very good sort of fellow," who would never "do" in society.

"I'm awfully sorry to say I haven't!" returned Julian meekly.

There was a moment's pause, and Mrs. Romaine tapped impatiently on the papers lying by her.

"It is such an inconvenient moment," she said at last. "I have just made all my arrangements for the quarter—I don't mean that you can't have it, of course you can, dear—but it is difficult to lay my hand on it at this moment."

"Falconer could arrange it for you," suggested Julian, alluding to Falconer in his capacity of trustee for the first time, as it happened.

Mrs. Romaine started violently, and a sharp exclamation of dissent rose to her lips. She stopped it half uttered, and paused a moment, controlling herself with difficulty.

"No," she said at last, in rather a hard tone. "I would rather not do that. I will think it over and see what can be done. We must raise your allowance, sir. I can't have mines sprung on me like this!"

She had risen as she spoke, and as he followed her example she lifted her face towards him for the good-night kiss which always passed between them.

"I will sleep upon it," she said. "Good night, extravagant boy."

## CHAPTER XIII

THE stall-holders presented a singularly fresh and unworn appearance, considering how much they had undergone, as they gradually put in an appearance at their stall on the following day, and gathered together in little knots to compare notes as to their sufferings, and here and there to allude incidentally to their takings—which certainly seemed disproportionate to the exertions of which they were the result. The fancy dress idea on which Mrs. Halse's whole soul had been set in March had been abandoned when Mrs. Halse found a fresh hobby in April; and each lady wore that variety of the fashion of the day which seemed most desirable in her eyes. All the dresses were very "smart," and as their wearers moved about, visiting one another's stalls, exchanging greetings, and inspecting one another's wares with critical eyes, they showed to conspicuous advantage. For, during the first hour at least, the stall-holders and their satellites, male and female—a mere handful of people in the great hall—had the entire place with all its decorations to themselves.

It was the cheap day, however, and as the afternoon wore on the hall gradually filled with that curious class of person which is always craving for any link, however "sham," with the fashionable world, and makes it a point of self-respect to attend all public functions in which "society" chances to be engaged. These far-off votaries of fashion walked about, looking not at the stalls, but at the ladies in attendance on them, turning away as a rule in stolid silence when invited in mellifluous tones to buy; or perhaps investing a shilling when long search had resulted in the discovery of a twopenny article to be had for that sum, for the sake of making a purchase from one of the leaders of fashion; some of them, with a vague notion that it was fashionable to "know every one," kept up a great show of talk and laughter, and were constantly seeing acquaintances on the other side of the hall—with whom they never by any chance came in contact. But no one spent more than five shillings, and the stall-holders began to find the position pall.

"I call this deadly!" said Mrs. Halse, subsiding into a chair, and looking up pathetically at Julian Romaine, who stood by. Julian should have been in attendance at the stall next but one, where Mrs. Pomeroy and his mother reigned, but Mrs. Halse, in view of the exertions before her, had summoned to her aid, about a week before, Miss Hilda Newton; and Miss Hilda Newton was looking irresistibly bewitching to-day in a big yellow hat. Her spirits, also, bore the strain of the proceedings better than did those of the other young ladies.

"Suppose we pick out some things—cheap things"—with a little grimace—"and go about among the people and try and sell them," she said now adventurously, looking up into Julian's face, with her pretty black eyes dancing. "I've done it heaps of times at bazaars, and it always goes well. Let us try, Mr. Romaine."

Mr. Romaine was by no means loath, and a few minutes later his mother, whose eyes had been covering Mrs. Halse's stall all the time she tried to persuade into a purchase a sharp-faced girl, whose sole object was a sufficiently prolonged inspection of Mrs. Romaine's dress to enable her to find out how "that body was made," saw them sally forth together laughing and talking in low, confidential tones. Her lips tightened slightly; the reappearance of Miss Newton had found Mrs. Romaine's dislike to the pretty, opinionated, self-reliant girl as active and apparently unreasoning as it had been on her previous visit.

"What a very good idea!" she said now suavely, turning to Mrs. Pomeroy who sat by, a picture of placid content, and indicating the adventurous pair as they disappeared among the people. "We must try something of the sort, I think. Maud, dear"—Miss Pomeroy had recently become Maud to Mrs. Romaine—"do you see? I really think something might be done in that way."

Miss Pomeroy, who was standing in front of the stall, a charming and apparently quite inanimate figure in white, assented demurely, and Mrs. Romaine, looking round for a man, caught the eye of Loring. He came to her instantly.

"You'll do capitally," she said brightly, and Miss Pomeroy, making no objection to the proceeding, was started forth with Loring, the latter carrying a small stock-in-trade, to emulate Miss Newton and Julian. That stock-in-trade was quite un-

touched, however, when about a quarter of an hour later they returned to the stall a little hot and discomfited.

"We haven't made a success," said Loring with a rather sardonic smile; "Miss Pomeroy says I'm no good! Now, there's that fellow Julian doing a roaring trade!"

Julian and Miss Newton, in point of fact, were at that moment visible returning to Mrs. Halse's stall, evidently in high feather, all their stock sold out. Mrs. Romaine watched Julian counting his gains into Mrs. Halse's hand, saying laughingly to Loring as she did so:

"You are not boy enough for this kind of thing, I'm afraid!" And then Julian, with a final laughing nod, turned away from Mrs. Halse, and came hastily towards his mother's stall.

"That's right!" said Mrs. Romaine gaily, ignoring the fact that he had evidently not come to stay. "I was just wanting you, sir, to go round with Miss Pomeroy, if she will kindly go with you, and get rid of some of our odds and ends!"

Julian stopped short and flushed a little.

"I'm awfully sorry!" he said. "I'll come back and do it with pleasure! But I have just promised to go round again with Miss Newton. I came to see if you could give us some change."

His mother supplied his wants smilingly, and he was gone. She had turned away with rather compressed lips when a voice behind her said half hesitatingly, half gushingly, and with a strong German accent:

"We are surely unmistakable! It is—yes, it must be, the much-honoured Mrs. Romaine!"

Mrs. Romaine turned quickly and gazed at the speaker obviously unrecognisingly. Nor did the two figures with whom she was confronted look in the least like acquaintances of hers. They were young women of the plainest and most angular German type, shabbily dressed according to the canons of middle-class German taste.

"She remembers us not, Gretchen!" began the younger of the two. And then a sudden light of recollection broke over Mrs. Romaine. They were two girls who had been training for a musical career at Leipsic, whom it had been the fashion to patronise; they had not developed as had been expected, however, and she had entirely forgotten their existence.

"Fräulein Schmitz!" she said now with distant brightness. "Ah, of course! How stupid of me! How do you do?"

They were very loquacious. Mrs. Romaine had heard all about their careers; all the reasons that had led to their spending a fortnight in London; and was beginning to think that the moment had come for getting rid of them, when, having exhausted themselves in compliments on her appearance, they enquired after Julian.

"Though we have seen Mr. Romaine," said the elder, "since, ah, but much since we had the pleasure to see his mother. It was in Alexandria in the winter past—we hoped that some concerts there might be possible, but there is so much jealousy and favouritism—it was in Alexandria that we met him. He was travelling in Egypt, he told to us."

"Yes!" said Mrs. Romaine, smothering a yawn. "He was in Egypt——" she stopped suddenly, and her eyes seemed to contract strangely. "Where did you say you saw him?" she said.

"It was in Alexandria! He was there for the day only, and he was to us most kind. He arrived in the morning early by the same train, and he showed us much until at night he left."

"At Alexandria?"

"Surely! At Alexandria!"

"You must have made a mistake. It was some other place."

Mrs. Romaine's tone was curiously unlike that in which she had conducted the early part of the conversation. It was sharp and direct. Fräulein Schmitz seemed to notice and resent the change.

"But we have not made a mistake, I must assure you!" she said stiffly. "It was at Alexandria. We saw him go away in the train."

There was a moment's pause. Mrs. Romaine was looking straight before her with those strangely contracted eyes; her lips a thin, pale line. The sisters waited a moment, evidently affronted. Then, finding that Mrs. Romaine took no notice whatever of them, they exchanged resentful glances, and the elder spoke.

"We will say good-bye!" she said formally. "It is time that we were going!"

Mrs. Romaine seemed to remember their presence—gradually only. Then she said quickly, and in a voice that sounded as though her throat were dry:

"You are going at once? Right out of the hall at once?"

"At once we are going, yes!" was the reply, and with a stiff inclination of their heads they moved away.

Mrs. Romaine followed the two angular forms with her eyes until they reached the entrance and disappeared. Then she swept a quick glance round the hall. Julian was at the further end deeply absorbed in his proceedings with Miss Newton. The Fräulein Schmitz had evidently been unseen by him.

His mother looked at him for a moment with a strange, fixed gaze, and then she turned her eyes away mechanically, and moved her mouth with a little twitch as though she felt the muscles stiffening and knew that they must not take the lines they would; there was a deadly pallor about her mouth. At that instant Loring came up to her with a witty satirical comment on the scene at which she was apparently gazing, and for the next few minutes she stood there exchanging gay little observations with him, the pallor never altering, her eyes never moving. Then quite suddenly she turned towards him.

"I want some tea!" she said. "Take me to the refreshment place, Mr. Loring!"

Julian was threading his way to where she stood, and though she turned instantly in the direction of the refreshment stall, followed perforce by Loring, she passed close to him. He stopped and said something, but she only nodded to him and went rapidly on.

A great many other stall-holders were recruiting themselves with tea and ices, and they were all more or less in spirits, real or affected, at the approaching prospect of the end of their labours. Mrs. Romaine was instantly hailed as one of a very smart group, and took her place with eager, high-pitched gaiety. She did not go back to her stall, tea being over, but moved about the bazaar, always with a little party in attendance, laughing and talking. She and Julian were dining with a large party of stall-holders at Mrs. Pomeroy's; they were all to repair thither direct from the bazaar, and Mrs. Romaine took a detachment in her carriage. Only one instant of solitude came to her before the luxurious, hilarious meal; only one instant, when the stream of descending ladies left her behind on an upper landing. In that instant, as if involuntarily and unconsciously to herself, the gaiety fell from her face like a mask, leaving it haggard and ghastly. She put her hand—it was icy cold—up to her head.



"He told me a lie!" she said to herself. "A lie! Oh, my boy!"

She was very bright and witty as she and Julian drove home together, and the greyish whiteness which was stealing over her face was unnoticed by her son's careless eyes even when they stood in the well-lighted hall.

"Are you going straight up, mother?" he said. "If so, I'll say good night. I want a cigar."

She paused a moment and looked at him with that indescribable tenderness which haunted her eyes at times as they rested on him, intensified a thousandfold.

"I'll come and sit with you for a little while if you will have me," she said.

She tried evidently for her usual manner, and succeeded inasmuch as Julian noticed nothing beyond. But beneath the surface there was something not wholly to be suppressed—something which looked out of her eyes, trembled in her voice, lingered in her touch as she laid her hand on his arm; something which, taken in conjunction with the shreds of affectation with which she strove to cover it, and with the boy's profound unconsciousness, was as pathetic as it was beautiful and strange.

She drew him into his own little room, and then with a forced laugh at herself she pushed him gently into a chair, and insisted on waiting upon him—bringing him cigar, matches, ash-tray—anything she could think of to add to his comfort, laughing all the time at him and at herself, and hugging those shreds of affectation close. But there was that about her, if there had been any one to see and understand, which made her one with all the many mothers since the world began who, with their hearts aching and bleeding with impotent pity and love, have tried to find some outlet for their yearning in the strange instinct for service which goes always hand in hand with mother love as with no other love on earth.

She lit his match at last, and then knelt down beside his chair.

"My dearest," she said, "my dearest, you shall have that two hundred—to-morrow if you like! You did not think me vexed about it, did you? You know I only want you to be happy, Julian, don't you?"

Julian laid down his cigar with a merry laugh. "I should be a fool if I didn't!" he answered, patting her hand with

boyish affection. "It's awfully good of you, dear, and I'm frightfully grateful. I won't make such a fool of myself again."

Mrs. Romayne put up her hand quickly. "Don't promise, Julian!" she said in a strange breathless way, "you might—you might forget, you know, and then perhaps you wouldn't like to tell me! And I want to know! I always want to know!" She stopped abruptly, an almost agonised appeal in her eyes.

She was still kneeling at his side, with her eyes fixed on his face; and suddenly, abruptly, almost as though the words forced themselves from her against her will, she said, with a slight catch in her voice:

"Julian, I met Fräulein Schmitz to-day!"

He met her eyes for a moment, his own questioning and uncomprehending; then gradually there stole over his face recollection, vague at first, which became as it grew definite rather shamefaced, rather annoyed, and rather amused.

"Oh!" he said; his tone was light and daring enough, though a touch of genuine shame and embarrassment lurked in it. "Oh, I call that hard lines!"

He was smiling daringly into her face with an acceptance of the situation that was perfectly frank. His mother's hands, as they rested on the arm of his chair, were tightly wrung together, and her eyes never stirred from his face.

"Why?" she said rather hoarsely, "why did you?"

He laughed, shrugging his shoulders and throwing out his hands with a graceful foreign movement.

"I was rather a culprit, you see," he said. "I only spent those few hours in Alexandria, and I never gave a thought to your commission. And I felt such a brute about it that I wasn't up to confessing!"

It was the truth and the whole truth, and it conveyed itself as such. Mrs. Romayne knelt there for a moment more, looking into his eyes, her own wide and strained; and then she rose heavily and slowly to her feet. There was a pause.

The silence was broken by Julian, evidently with a view to changing a subject on which he could hardly be said to show to conspicuous advantage.

"You're going to write to Falconer, I suppose? You wouldn't like to do it to-night, dear, would you? He would get the letter in better time if it was posted the first thing. You could do it at my table there!"

Mrs. Romaine did not speak. Julian could not see her face.

"Yes!" she said at last, and her voice sounded rather hollow and far away, "I will do it to-night if you like." She bent down and kissed him. "Good night!" she said.

"Won't you write here?" said Julian in some surprise.

"No, I'll go upstairs!" she answered, and went out of the room.

She went upstairs, moving slowly and heavily, straight to her dainty little writing-table, and sat down, drawing out a sheet of paper. She wrote the conventional words of address to Dennis Falconer, and then she stopped suddenly and lifted her face. It was ghastly. The eyes, sunken and dim, seemed to be confronting the very irony of fate.

## CHAPTER XIV

"THE jolliest week I've ever had in my life !"

"I wonder how often you've said that before ?"

August had come and gone, the greater part of September had followed in its wake, and a ruddy September sun was making the end of the summer glorious. In the large garden of a large country house in Norfolk, everything seen in its wonderful radiance seemed to be even overcharged with colour, if such a thing is possible with nature ; it was as though all the beauty of the summer had been intensified and arrested in its maturity into one final glow. The rich green of the smooth lawns, the colours of the autumnal flowers, the tints of the foliage, the very atmosphere, seemed all alike to be pausing for the moment at the most perfect point of radiance. But nature never pauses ; and that this was indeed the final glow, the end of her summer beauty, was revealed here and there by little significant touches, or written across earth and sky in broader letters. The birds were gone or going. Even as Julian Romaine spoke a flight of swallows overhead was wheeling and darting hither and thither in preparation for an imminent departure ; the very glory of the trees meant decay, and in spite of all the efforts of indefatigable gardeners, dead leaves strewed the trim lawns and gravel paths.

All these signs and tokens of the approach of the inevitable end were particularly conspicuous about the narrow grass path shut in by high yew hedges, up and down which Julian Romaine and Hilda Newton were sauntering together. Fallen leaves were thick upon it, and in the flower-beds, by which it was bordered, the summer flowers, whose day was long since done, had not been replaced by their autumn successors. Apparently, the walk was a secluded and little frequented one, on which it was not worth while to spend much pains. Judging from the coquettish toss of the head, tempered by a certain softness of tone, with which Miss Newton replied to the insinuated regret of Julian's words, it seemed not improbable that those characteristics had something to do with their selec-

tion of that particular spot for their stroll. They had been staying in this pleasant country house together for the last week, the hostess having taken a fancy to Mrs. Halse's cousin in town; and now in another hour Julian and his mother would be on their way home.

As the half-mocking, half-inviting words fell from his companion's lips, Julian turned impetuously towards the pretty, piquant face; it was shaded by a bewitching garden hat.

"I never meant it so much before, on my honour," he said impulsively; adding with a boyish suggestion of tender reproach in his voice: "I should have thought you might have known that. It's awfully hard lines to think it's over."

Miss Newton had a large crimson dahlia in her hand, and she was plucking the petals slowly away and scattering them at her feet.

"Is it?" she said.

"You know it is," he returned ardently, trying to catch a glimpse of the dark face bent over the crimson flower. "Won't you tell me that you're a little sorry, too? Miss Newton—Hilda——"

His vigorous young hand was just closing over the pretty little fingers that held the dahlia; the dainty little figure was yielding to him nothing loath, it seemed, when from the further end of the grass walk a third voice broke in upon their *ête-à-ête*, and as they started instinctively apart Mrs. Romaine, accompanied by their hostess, came sauntering towards them.

"Taking a farewell look at the quaint old walk, Julian?" she said with suave carelessness as she drew near them. "The garden is looking too beautiful this morning, isn't it, Miss Newton? What a lovely dahlia that is you were showing Julian!"

She looked smilingly at Miss Newton as she spoke, apparently quite unconscious that the girl's face was white—not with embarrassment, disappointment, or emotion, but with sheer angry resentment—and she moved on as she spoke, tacitly compelling Miss Newton to move on at her side, while Julian and the other lady followed, perforce together.

"We have only about ten minutes more, I'm afraid," she said. "I was just taking a last stroll round the place with Mrs. Ponsonby. I'm afraid we shall find London rather unbearable to-night. The call of duty is always so very inconvenient!"

She was leading the way toward the house, and her little high-pitched laugh eliciting only a monosyllabic response from the girl at her side, she resumed what was practically a monologue, carried on with a suavity and ease which was perhaps over-elaborated by just a touch. Her farewells, which followed almost immediately on their arrival at the house, when a little bustle of departure ensued—in which Miss Newton took no part, that young lady having promptly disappeared—were characterised by the same manner, about which there was also a little touch of suppressed excitement. It was not until she and Julian were alone together in a first-class carriage of the London express that her gay words and laughs ceased, and she let herself sink back in her corner, unfolding a newspaper with a short, hardly audible sigh of relief.

A very slight and indefinable change had come to Mrs. Romayne's face in the course of the last two months. It had been perceptible in her animation, and was still more perceptible in her repose. The lines about her face which had needed special influences to bring them into prominence during the winter were always plainly perceptible now ; and they gave her face a very slightly careworn look, which was emphasized by the expression of her eyes and mouth.

The eyes had always a slightly restless look in them in these days ; even now, as she read her paper, or appeared to read it, there was no concentration in them ; and every now and then they were lifted hastily, almost furtively, over the paper's edge. The mouth was at once weaker and more determined ; weaker, inasmuch as it had grown more sensitive, more nervously responsive to the movements of her restless eyes ; and more determined, as though with the expression of a constant mental attitude.

There was a good deal of indecision in her face, and its expression varied slightly, but incessantly, as she fixed her eyes anew on the printed words before her after each fleeting glance at the boyish face outlined by the cushions opposite. She laid down her paper at last, with a little deliberate rustle, apparently intended to attract attention, and as she did so her face assumed its ordinary superficial vivacity ; an expression which harmonised less well with the rather sharpened features than it had done three months before.

‘A good novel, Julian?’ she said airily, smothering a

yawn as she spoke, and indicating with a little gesture of her head the book in Julian's hand.

Julian had been holding the book in his hand, ever since they left the little Norfolk station from which they had started, but he had scarcely turned a page. His features were composed into an expression of boyish resentment, about which there was that distinct suggestion of sullenness which is the usual outward expression of the hauteur of youth. As his mother spoke he flushed hotly with angry self-consciousness.

"Not particularly," he said, without lifting his eyes.

There was a moment's pause, during which Mrs. Romaine's eyes were fixed upon him with concentration enough in them now; and then she broke into a light laugh, and leaning suddenly forward laid one of her hands on his.

"Poor old boy!" she said, in a tone half mocking, half sympathising. "It was very hard on you, wasn't it? It's a cruel fate that makes young men so ineligible, and girls so pretty, and throws the two perversely together! If you've any thought to spare from yourself, sir, though, I think you should bestow a little gratitude upon me for my very timely arrival!"

She laughed again, and in her laugh, as in her voice, there was the faintest possible touch of reality, and that reality was anxiety. Then, as Julian twisted his hand from under hers with a gruff and almost inaudible: "I don't see that!" she leant back in her seat again with a smile.

"My dear boy," she said gaily; "it's a very sad position for you, I admit; but for the present you're dependent on your mother—not such a very stingy mother, eh, sir? I think you'll find it will be all right for you, when the right young woman turns up, as no doubt she will some day. Perhaps you'll find that your mother won't abdicate so very ungracefully. But, you see, it must be the right young woman!"

In spite of the laugh in it, there was a ring in the tone in which the words were spoken which was full of significance, and the significance and the laughter seemed to be doing battle together as Mrs. Romaine went on, ignoring Julian's interjection:

"I don't think you would have found it a very pleasant situation, to be engaged to Miss Newton with the prospect before you of keeping her waiting until you had made your fortune at the bar; and I'm sorry to say I don't share your conviction of the moment, that she is the right young woman.

She is very pretty, I allow, and a very nice girl, no doubt." Mrs. Romaine's voice grew a little hard as she said the last words. "But she's not at all the sort of girl that I should like you to marry. She has no money, in the first place."

"I have enough for both," said Julian impetuously, and then stopped short and coloured crimson.

His mother broke into a merry laugh.

"No, poor boy!" she said. "I have enough for both! That's just what I want you to remember in your intercourse with pretty girls. After all, you know, the position has its advantages! You may flirt as much as you like while you're known to be dependent on your mother, and no one will take you too seriously."

Julian did not echo her laugh, nor did he make any comment on her words. He sat with his face turned away from her, and a rather strange expression in his eyes—an expression which was at once unformed and mutinous. His mother could not see it, but the outline of his profile apparently disturbed her. The anxiety in her face deepened again, mixed this time with an expression of doubt and self-distrust. As though to emphasize the lightness of her preceding tone, she turned the conversation into a comment on the landscape, and took up her paper again.

The remainder of the journey passed in total silence; and the drive home from the station was silent, too. An arrival in London at the end of September is not a very pleasant proceeding, unless it is approached with considerable industry, determination, and a large stock of energy. The butterflies of society, and, indeed, a large proportion of the bees, have not yet returned. Those who have returned have done so under stern compulsion to begin the winter's work; and there is a general, all-pervading sentiment as of the end of holidays and the beginning of term time.

The day that had been so radiantly lovely in Norfolk had evidently been oppressively hot and airless in town, and the general air of exhaustion and squalor, which such circumstances are apt to produce in London, did not help to render its appearance more attractive.

Number twenty two, Queen Anne Street, Chelsea, itself seemed to be touched by the general depression. The summer flowers in the window-boxes had been taken away, and their successors were apparently waiting for orders from the mistress



of the house ; and as Mrs. Romaine and Julian entered the hall, there was that indefinable atmosphere about the house which two months' abandonment to even the best of servants is apt to produce—an atmosphere which is the reverse of cheerful. There were letters lying on the hall-table, one of which Mrs. Romaine handed to Julian with the comment : "From Mr. Allardyce, isn't it, Julian ? Will he be ready for you to-morrow ?"

Julian's legal studies were, in fact, to begin in earnest on the following day ; and when, the next morning, he said good-bye to his mother and set out for the Temple, she followed him to the door with a laughing "Good speed." That, at least, was her ostensible motive, but there was something in her face as she laid her hand on his arm as he turned away on the doorstep which suggested that the last words she said to him were those that she had really followed him to say.

"What time shall you be back, Julian ?"

And as he answered carelessly :

"I can't tell ; not till dinner-time, I expect," there came into her eyes a curious shadow of yearning anxiety.

"Take care of yourself, sir !" she said lightly, and went back into the house.

That shadow lived in her eyes all day as she went about giving orders and "putting things to rights," as she said ; striving in fact, with a concealed earnestness which seemed somewhat disproportionate to its object, to give the house that peculiar air of brightness which had been so characteristic of it, and which somehow did not seem so easily to be obtained as formerly.

Her face was gaiety itself, however, when she stood in the drawing-room as the dinner-bell rang, very daintily dressed in a tea-gown which Julian had admired, waiting for her son. A moment elapsed and Julian dashed downstairs, breathless and apologetic, but rather sparing of his words. His first day's work hardly seemed to have dissipated the cloud which had hung about him that morning at breakfast, and as his mother slipped her hand playfully into his arm with a laughing word or two of forgiveness, he turned and led her out of the room without the response which would have been natural to him.

"Have you had a pleasant day ?" said Mrs. Romaine lightly, as they sat down to dinner.

"Pretty well," returned Julian indifferently. He said no

more, and Mrs. Romaine, with one of her quick, half-furtive glances at him, began to talk of her own day. She had paid some calls in the afternoon, and had a great deal of news for him as to who had and who had not returned to town; and a great deal of gossip which was both amusing in itself, and rendered more amusing by the piquant animation with which she retailed it. It failed to rouse much interest in Julian, apparently, however, and after a time his mother returned to her original topic—again with a quick, anxious glance at his face.

"Did you find Mr. Allardyce easy to work with?" she enquired, interestedly this time.

"Yes: I suppose so," was the unresponsive response.

"How long did he keep you?"

"I got away at four o'clock."

Something seemed to leap in Mrs. Romaine's eyes—to be instantly suppressed—as she said, with an indifference which any ear keener than Julian's might have detected to be forced:

"Four o'clock! And what have you been doing since then, may I ask? You did not come in till a quarter past seven."

Perhaps Julian felt the inquisition in the question, though he was conscious of nothing unusual in his mother's voice; for he answered, rather briefly:

"I went to the Garrick with a fellow."

"What fellow?" demanded his mother in the same tone.

Julian moved impatiently.

"There's another fellow reading with Allardyce," he answered. "Griffiths—he took me in."

As though the suppressed impatience of his tone had not escaped her, Mrs. Romaine found herself reminded at this point of something she had heard that afternoon during one of her visits. And she proceeded to place her little piece of news before Julian with every advantage that narration could give it, though her face looked rather thin and sharp as she talked. Dinner was over by this time, and as she finished with a laugh, she rose from her seat, and put her hand on Julian's arm. His face was somewhat bored and dissatisfied, as though his mother's effort for his entertainment entirely failed to compensate him for the merry house-parties of the last month.

"I think I shall have to come and keep you company

while you smoke your cigar," she said lightly ; adding, with an assumption of a sudden thought on the subject which was not wholly successful : " By-the-bye, the Garrick Club must be a most attractive spot if you stayed there from four o'clock till seven ? "

Julian took a quick step forward. The movement might have been due to his desire to open the door for her, or it might have been an expression of the irritation of which his face was full.

" I didn't get there at four," he said. " I really don't know what time it was, but it must have been nearly five. And I walked home ; so I left somewhere about half-past six."

The irritation was in his voice as well as in his face ; and his mother patted him gaily on the shoulder, with her most artificially self-deriding laugh.

" He's quite annoyed at being asked so many questions ! " she exclaimed. " It's a dreadful nuisance to have such a silly old mother, isn't it ? But you haven't told me what Mr. Griffiths is like yet ? "

Julian had tried to laugh in answer to her first words ; but the sound produced had been almost as greatly wanting in reality as had been the ease of his mother's tone, and he answered now with undisguised impatience.

" Like ? Oh, he's like—any other fellow, mother. Nothing particular, one way or the other." He paused a moment, and then added hastily : " I was rather thinking of running down to the club this evening, dear, if you wouldn't mind being alone. I want to hear whether Loring has come back. There's just a chance he might be there, you know."

He had said that morning that there was no likelihood of Loring's returning for another two or three days ; but Mrs. Romaine forbore to remind him of that fact. Nor did she allude to the conviction which had turned her suddenly rather pale ; namely, that his thoughts of going down to the club had arisen within the last few minutes.

" Very well, dear," she said, smiling up at him. " Go, by all means. Oh, no ! I shall be quite happy with a book."

He did not look back at her as he left the room after another word or two, or the expression on her face might have arrested even his youthfully self-centred and preoccupied attention.

Loring was not at the club, nor was there any information

to be obtained there as to his movements. Julian played a game of billiards and lost it through sheer carelessness, and then determined to go home again. He would walk part of the way, he said to himself, though he had had one walk that day. He wanted to "think things over."

The phrase was serious, and by comparison with the process to which it was attached, grandiloquent. Julian's mental apparatus was at present as undeveloped as that of a fashionable young man of four-and-twenty may usually be taken to be. The process of "thinking things over," as conducted within his good-looking head, involved no stern process of reasoning, no exhaustive system of logical deduction from cause to effect, no carefully-balanced opinions of the past or decisions for the future. When he proposed to himself to "think things over," in short, he simply meant that he should ring a strictly limited number of changes on the fact that, as he expressed it vaguely to himself, it was "awfully hard lines."

It had taken him some time to come to this conclusion. He had flirted with Miss Hilda Newton very happily for the last ten days, with a great deal of wholly unnecessary assistance from that young lady herself, without the very faintest definite intentions towards her. He had enjoyed it, and she had enjoyed it; and the idea which had occurred to him once or twice, that his mother did not enjoy it, had not particularly affected him. Circumstances alone would have been responsible for the proposal which had so nearly been an accomplished fact on the day before. And had the speech to Miss Newton, interrupted by Mrs. Romaine, reached its legitimate conclusion, and received its inevitable response, it was extremely likely that he might by this time have been the victim of a vague consciousness of having made a mistake. But it had been interrupted; and a deeply-injured sense of having been thwarted was consequently not unnatural in its author. That sense of injury which might have passed away in mere sentiment, but which, on the other hand, might, if it had been left untouched by words, have developed into a secret breach between mother and son, had been focussed and rendered definite and tangible, as it were, by his mother's laughing speeches in the train. It was as he had sat gazing blankly out of the window during the last half-hour of their journey, that he had come to the conclusion before mentioned that it was "awfully hard lines,"

"It makes a fellow feel such a fool!" he said to himself as morosely as the undeveloped nature of his temperament permitted, as he issued moodily from his club and started in the direction of Piccadilly. "It makes a fellow feel such a confounded fool!" He could not reduce this general principle to detail, but what he really felt was something of the sensation of the child who realises suddenly and for the first time the "pretence" of the fairyland of shadows in which he has been performing prodigies of valour.

All the intercourse with the pretty girls of his "sets" which Julian had hitherto accepted simply and unquestioningly, had suddenly become flat, stale, and unprofitable to him. All illusions had gone from it, and the reality was painfully unsatisfying, and wounding to his self-love. There is all the difference in the world between a vague understanding and a practical realisation. Julian had known, of course, from the very first that he was dependent on his mother, but he had never felt it until the previous day. He had known that marriage without her consent was practically impossible for him; but the fact had never before been brought home to him. The veto which had descended so impalpably and decisively upon what he was now prepared to characterise as his hopes, with regard to Miss Newton, shrivelling them to nothingness, had also shrivelled away all the embellishing haze by which the conditions of his life had been surrounded.

The background to all his thoughts on the subject; the background which had grown up almost without consciousness on his own part, with his first humiliated realisation of the facts of the case, and which remained a vague, brooding shadow in his mind; was resentment against his mother; a resentment which, taken in conjunction with the careless and effusive affection of his attitude to her hitherto, threw a curious light on his relations with her. But against this background, and affecting him far more keenly, was a sore sense that life had suddenly lost its savour for him. The charm of flirtation had vanished utterly before his mother's words as to its harmlessness. The privilege which she assigned to him seemed to reduce him to the level of a shadow among substances, to put him at a hopeless disadvantage with all the women of his world, and render his intercourse with them a farce of which both they and he must be perfectly conscious.

"It's all such utter humbug!" he said to himself, that

being the nearest definition he could attain of the vague thoughts that were passing through his mind. Then he ceased to express himself, even mentally, and walked along, meditating moodily and discontentedly. He was walking along Piccadilly when he found his thoughts gradually returning to his actual surroundings as though something were drawing them, unconsciously to himself, as extraneous objects which one is not even aware of noticing will sometimes do.

It was about eleven o'clock : not a very pleasant time in Piccadilly ; and the pavement was by no means crowded. The first detail to which he awoke was the hilarious demeanour of a young man just in front of him, who was walking, very unsteadily, in the same direction as himself. He was a young man of the commonest cockney type, obviously in the maudlin stage of intoxication.

As Julian's senses became more fully alive he noticed, a pace or two in front of the young man, the shabbily-dressed figure of a girl. She was walking hurriedly and nervously, and as the young man quickened his uneven steps in response to a sudden quickening of hers, Julian saw that the intoxicated speeches which had first grown into his own meditation were addressed to the girl, and that she was trying in vain to escape from them. It was not a particularly uncommon sight for a London street, and a half-indignant, half-careless glance would naturally have been all the attention Julian would have vouchsafed it. But as the pair preceded him up Piccadilly ; the girl shrinking and afraid ; afraid to attract attention by too rapid movements ; as much afraid, as her nervous, undecided glances around her showed, of the help a protest might attract to her as of her pursuer ; the man, sodden and brutal, absolutely destitute for the moment of reasoning faculty ; Julian found his attention fascinated by them.

A spark of natural youthful chivalry, entirely undeveloped by his life, stirred in him. He quickened his steps, involuntarily apparently, and with no definite intention, for he was just passing them with a quick, undecided glance at the girl, when he saw her stop suddenly and shrink back against a neighbouring shop-front. Whether a faint shriek really came from her, or not, he never knew, but her eyes met his and appealed to him almost as if without the owner's consciousness. The man had laid a hot, drunken hand upon the worn, ungloved fingers.

Julian stopped.

"Let go!" he said peremptorily. His tone was so sharp, and the interference was so sudden and unlooked-for, that the man, stupid with drink, did as he was bidden as if involuntarily. "Be off!" continued Julian in the same tone.

The man stared at him for a minute, and broke into a maudlin laugh, a discordant snatch of a comic song, and staggered on his way, as though the sudden breaking of his chain of ideas had obliterated the girl from his memory.

She was standing, as Julian turned to her, leaning back against the shop-front, shaking from head to foot, but evidently making a violent effort to control herself.

"Thank you, sir," she murmured tremulously, and was moving to go on her way with faltering, trembling footsteps, when Julian stopped her.

"This is not a nice place for you to be alone in," he said almost involuntarily. "Have you far to go?"

He had looked at her for that moment during which she had stood motionless, with her face outlined against the dark shutter, with a strangely mingled feeling that her face was wonderfully unlike any with which he was acquainted; and yet that he had actually seen it before—seen it, and experienced the same half-startled, half-wondering sensation. It was white now to the very lips, and the great, brown eyes, dark and liquid, looked out from under their soft lashes and level eyebrows, wide with terror and distress. Her features were beautifully formed, though they were so thin and worn that it would never have occurred to Julian to class her among the ranks of pretty girls. But the real charm of her face lay about her mouth. It was very strong—though the strength was latent and entirely unconscious; very simple, and very sweet; and even the pallor of her lips and the slight trembling about them could not detract from the beauty of the line they made. Her hair, as Julian noticed, was of a soft black and very luxuriant. She was rather tall, and her shabby jacket concealed and spoilt the outline of her figure; but the set of her well-shaped head was full of instinctive grace.

She paused a moment before she answered him, looking into his face with a simple directness which had a dignity of its own.

"Yes, sir," she said in a low voice, which shook a little in spite of her evident efforts to steady it; "to the Hammersmith Road."

"But you're not going to walk, are you?" said Julian.

Apparently her glance at his face had satisfied her. She answered him this time without hesitation.

"Yes, sir," she said.

Her voice was very musical and refined. It harmonised better with her face than with her worn, work-girl's dress, and the dignified deference of her manner.

"Then you must let me see you safely part of the way, at any rate," said Julian impulsively.

She hesitated, and looked at him again, and this time the large eyes grew moist with tears.

"It's very silly of me," she said tremulously. "I—I think it was his touching me that upset me so."

She had been rubbing one hand, all this time, mechanically and involuntarily, as it seemed, over the hand on which that drunken touch had fallen.

"I did try to get a 'bus, but they were all full. I couldn't let you take such trouble."

It needed only the unconscious gratitude of those words to convince Julian that it would be no trouble whatever. And he asserted the same with an assumption of authority and masterfulness quite new to him.

It was an hour and a half later when his mother, sitting up, wakeful, in her own room, caught the slight sound made by his latch-key in the door, and noticed a moment's pause before the door was opened. In that pause there had come to Julian one of those sudden flashes of light which sometimes illuminate a vainly-pondered question.

"Of course!" he said to himself, as he shut the door with a bang. "Of course! I knew I'd seen her before! In the thunderstorm, the night I dined with Garstin!"



## CHAPTER XV

THE oppressive autumn weather continued for the next week and more, but the atmosphere in the house at Chelsea gradually cleared ; at least, the electrical disturbances which had, as a matter of fact, culminated in Julian's departure for the club, subsided. As the days went on, Julian gradually recovered his spirits. His temper, which had given way so suddenly and completely under the strain put upon it by the unprecedented thwarting to which he had been subjected, recovered its careless easiness. The injured expression of moodiness disappeared wholly from his face, and his manner resumed its buoyancy.

Nevertheless, the life of the present autumn was by no means the life of the past spring. Partly, of course, the different framework was responsible ; life, especially at this particular moment, when winter society was as yet hardly formed, consisted by no means wholly of a social existence. It was, in fact, distinctly "slack" and heavy on social lines as compared with the high pressure of the season ; and the introduction into the routine of life of a certain number of hours of regular work on Julian's part—the first practical acknowledgement in the house in Queen Anne Street, that work had anything to do with life—could not fail to alter the tone to some extent. But there was a subtle change in Julian himself, which was hardly to be accounted for on such broad lines. He had recovered his normal mental temperature, indeed, but the interval of disturbance seemed to have had some indefinable effect upon him. He had recovered himself—but it was himself with a difference. It was almost impossible to narrow the difference into words. To say that he was colder to his mother, or that he stood deliberately aloof from her, would not have been true. But there was a touch of independence about his whole personality which was new to it ; a certain suggestion of a separate life and separate interests, such as must inevitably come to a man sooner or later, which seemed to tinge his intercourse with her—superficially the same as it remained—with something of carelessness, and even a hint of unconscious patronage.

If the change was felt by Mrs. Romaine, she made no sign ; or, at least, entered no protest. After the little explanation which had taken place in the railway carriage she had utterly ignored the cloud which his moodiness had created ; and she ignored its passing away. When Julian was at home she was always bright and pleasant ; always charmed to have him with her ; always ready to let him go. Her little jokes at his expense in his new character of a worker were full of tact. Her playful allusions to her own solitary days were always light and gay. Nevertheless, the characteristics which the ten weeks of their absence from town had brought to her face grew and intensified during the ten days that followed their return. Her eyes grew more restless, her mouth more sensitive, as though the strained, sharpened look of anxiety which haunted her face during the hour which preceded Julian's return, and during the whole evening, when, as happened several times in the course of that ten days, he dined out, went deep enough to leave lasting tokens of its presence. Her questions as to his work, and the new friends, the new haunts, consequent upon it, seemed to come from her lips—far less self-confident in expression in these days—almost in spite of herself. They were always uttered with a playfulness which hardly masked a slight nervousness underneath ; a nervousness which seemed to be a reminiscence of that first evening.

She was sitting alone in her drawing-room one afternoon towards the end of the second week of their return ; she had a book in her hand, and a tea-table before her. But she had neither poured herself out any tea, nor could she be said to be reading. Every two or three minutes her attention seemed to wander ; her eyes would stray vaguely about the room, and she would rise and move restlessly across it, to give some wholly unnecessary touch to a drapery or a glass of flowers. Once she had seated herself at her writing-table to begin a trivial note ; but the impulse had failed to carry her through, and she had returned to her chair and her book. It was half-past four, and she was expecting Julian. He had dined out on three consecutive nights, and was doing so again to-night. And in reply to her laughing protest against "never seeing him," he had promised carelessly to come home and have afternoon tea with her.

The door-bell rang at last, and as the drawing-room door opened she lifted a smiling face with a gaily approving comment on his punctuality.

"Good boy!" she began. Then she broke off and laughed lightly, though the brightness of her face suddenly ceased to be genuine.

The figure on the threshold was that of Marston Loring.

"Thank you," he said; "I am glad you think so!"

"The observation was not intended for you, I'm sorry to tell you," returned Mrs. Romaine, as she rose to receive him. "And I'm afraid even if I applied it to you, you would hardly condescend to accept it. How do you do? When did you come back? Sit down and let me give you some tea."

Loring sat down accordingly, with a mute witness in his manner of doing so to a certain amount of intimacy both with the room and its mistress; but that touch of admiring deference which had marked his demeanour during the early stages of his acquaintance with Mrs. Romaine, was still present with him, and was rendered only the more effective by the familiarity with which it was now combined.

"Thanks," he said; "a cup of tea is a capital idea. But I don't think it's quite kind of you to say that I wouldn't condescend to the epithet, 'Good boy.' I should like to have it applied to me of all things. It would be such a novelty, and so wholly undeserved!"

He spoke in that tone of sardonic daring on which a great deal of his social reputation rested, and Mrs. Romaine answered with a laugh.

"No doubt it would," she said, with that very slight and unreal assumption of reproof with which such a woman invariably treats the tacit confessions of a man of Loring's reputation. "You only want the epithet, then, because you know you don't deserve it."

She handed him the tea as she spoke with a shake of her head, and added:

"But tell me, now, when did you come back, and where have you been?"

"I've been to the Engadine," he answered; "why, I don't know, unless that for six weeks, at least, of my life I might fully appreciate the charms of London! I don't admire glaciers; snow mountains bore me; altitudes are always more or less wearisome; and society *au naturel* is not to be tolerated. I reached town the day before yesterday."

Marston Loring was faultlessly dressed. It was impossible to associate his attire with anything but Piccadilly and the best

clubs and the best drawing-rooms. His face, with its half-cynical, half-wearied expression, was, in its less individual characteristics, one of the typical faces of the society of the day. His voice and manner, well-bred, callous, and entirely unenthusiastic, were the voice and manner of that world where emotion is so entirely out of fashion that its existence as an ineradicable factor of healthy human nature is hardly acknowledged.

His presence and his cynical, cold-blooded talk seemed to do Mrs. Romaine good. Her face and manner hardened slightly, as though her nerves were braced, and something of the pinched, restless look of anxiety faded.

"It's very nice of you to come and see us so soon!" she exclaimed with genuine satisfaction. "Town has really been abominably empty these last ten days. I suppose we came back rather too soon, but it seemed time that Julian should get to work. Really, I've hardly seen a soul."

"It is a deadly time of year," assented Loring, with a quick look at her, "but I'm grateful to it if it makes my presence welcome to you. Of course I called at once. I was rather afraid you might be still away."

"We came back ten days ago," answered Mrs. Romaine, accepting and putting aside his little compliment with a mocking gesture, as a form of words entirely conventional. "Julian has been quite lost without you. He is looking very well, I think, and is working amazingly."

The introduction of Julian's name into the conversation had in neither case come from Julian's friend; but this time it appeared to strike Loring as incumbent upon him to pursue the topic.

"The approving words with which you received me were intended for him, I suppose," he said carelessly. "You're expecting him?"

There was a moment's pause while Mrs. Romaine turned her head, as if involuntarily, and listened intently; that haunted look coming suddenly back into her eyes. The moment passed, and she turned to Loring again with a quick, self-conscious glance, and an unreal laugh.

"I'm expecting him; yes," she said. "I'm ridiculous enough to make that very obvious, I'm afraid! I'm so glad he won't miss you. He doesn't generally come in at this hour. This is a treat—for me!"

She laughed, and Loring said with mock solemnity of interest:

"Indeed!"

"I really had to be quite plaintive this morning," she went on in the same tone, "on the subject of not seeing him for four days except at breakfast! He has made a good many new acquaintances already, it seems, and has to dine out a good deal."

"Really!" commented Loring. His tone was quite unmoved, and Mrs. Romaine did not see the expression in his shrewd, shallow eyes, as she spoke—an expression of amused curiosity. "He dines at his club, I suppose?" he enquired indifferently after a moment.

"Yes; or at some 'other fellow's' club," laughed his mother. "Legal institutions, I suppose!"

There was a brief silence; one of those silences which come when one branch of a conversation is felt to be exhausted; and then Loring finished his tea, put down his cup, and settled himself into a comfortable attitude.

"I forget whether you were taken with the Ibsen craze last season, Mrs. Romaine?" he said. "We shall all have to tie wet towels round our heads—it won't be becoming, I'm afraid—and give ourselves up to solitary meditation, I hear! He is to be the thing this winter, they tell me."

"Ibsen?" repeated Mrs. Romaine reflectively; obviously searching in her memory for some ideas to attach to the name, which she was as obviously conscious of having heard before. "Ibsen? Oh, yes," with a sudden flash of inspiration, "oh, yes, of course; that 'Dolls' House' man, that everybody talked of going to see just at the end of the season."

The first of those startling pictures of human nastiness which have since exercised criticism to so great an extent, and which may or may not be revelations, had taken a wonderful hold upon a certain section of "society," and had become, as Mrs. Romaine's words implied, almost the fashion in the preceding June. Society is always inclined to be literary and intellectual, or rather, to an assumption of those qualities, in the winter. It was with a sense of the absolute duty of priming herself beforehand that Mrs. Romaine continued, with every appearance of the deepest interest:

"Ah, no! I'm sorry to say I was never able to spare an evening. Everybody told me all about it, though. It must

have been awfully clever and interesting. But, you see, just at that time one has so much on hand! There was that dreadful bazaar, too. By-the-bye, have the Pomeroy's come back yet, do you know, Mr. Loring?"

Mr. Loring believed that they had not, and after a little discussion of their probable plays, Mrs. Romaine returned to the subject of Ibsen.

"Are they going to bring out a new play of his, did you say?" she said carelessly.

"So I hear," answered Loring. "An extraordinary piece of work, with a tremendous theory in it, of course. The idea is the influence of heredity."

Mrs. Romaine started slightly. A strange flash leapt up in her eyes, and as it died out, quenched as it seemed by iron resolution, it left a curious expression on her face; it was an expression in which a light scorn—the normal attitude of the shallow, fashionable woman towards deep questions of any kind—seemed to be battling indomitably for a place against something which was hardly to be held at bay, by no means to be suppressed.

"Heredity!" she said; and the ring of her voice matched the expression of her face.

"It's rather an interesting subject," continued Loring indolently. Scientific questions in their social aspects were just becoming fashionable. "It's wonderful how long we have stopped short at the inheritance of Roman noses, and violent tempers, and plain facts of that kind without getting to anything more subtle."

"Yes; I suppose it is," answered Mrs. Romaine. There was a hard restraint in her voice, which Loring took for pre-occupation and laid to the account of her expectation of Julian. She was sitting with her back to the light, and he could not see the expression of her face.

"It's awfully consoling, don't you know," he went on in the same tone, "to feel that one can lay all one's little failings to the account of some dead and gone ancestor, with a scientific mind. I don't notice, by-the-bye, that even the greatest and most enthusiastic scientists show any tendency to refer their virtues and talents back. I presume they are always self-developed."

Mrs. Romaine laughed, as she was obviously intended to do; but her laugh was rather harsh.

"Do you know, I think scientific men are a dreadful race!"

she said. "They think that they know so much better than everybody else, and that what they know is so immensely important. As a rule, you know, it's about something that they really can't know anything about, and if they could, it would be a great deal better not to bother about it."

She spoke with a confident, conclusive superiority, which is only possible, perhaps, in that section of society to which knowledge and brain-power are among the minor and entirely unimportant factors of life—except when the knowledge is knowledge of the world, and the brain-power that which has adapted itself to the requirements of society. But the superiority in her tone rang strained and false. She seemed to be forcing the attitude on herself even more than on Loring; and there was a faint ring of defiance in her voice—utterly inconsistent and incompatible with the words she spoke. The combination was curiously suggestive of that consuming fear which denies the very existence of that by which it is created.

Loring, however, was too fully occupied with a cynical appreciation of the humorous aspect of the wholesale condemnation of learning by crass ignorance to detect anything beneath the surface. An enigmatical smile touched his lips.

"There's a great deal of penetration in what you say," he said. "Of course, there would be! But I think you're a little sweeping, perhaps, when you say that they don't really know anything. Take heredity, for instance; it's an actual fact, capable of demonstration, that——"

But Loring's eloquence was broken short off. At that moment the door opened, and Julian Romaine came into the room.

Mrs. Romaine started to her feet at the sight of him with a strange, hardly articulate sound, which was almost a gasp of relief, though it passed unnoticed by either of the two men, as Julian advanced quickly to Loring.

"How are you, old man?" he said pleasantly. "Awfully glad to see you back again."

"This is the reward of merit, you see!" said Mrs. Romaine, as Loring replied, in the same tone. "You come home to tea with your mother, and you find a friend! Will you have some tea, sir?"

Her face was still a little odd, and unusual-looking, especially about the eyes; and the touch which she laid upon Julian, as if to enforce her words, was strangely clinging and nervous in its quick pressure.

The talk drifted in all sorts of directions after that; all more or less personal, either to the speakers, or to mutual acquaintances. As the moments passed, Loring's eyes were fixed once or twice, with momentary intentness, on the younger man. That new touch of independence about Julian did not belong only to his manner with his mother. It was just perceptible towards the friend whom he had hitherto admired with boyish enthusiasm.

Loring rose to go at last, and as he did so he turned to Julian.

"If it were not that I don't like to propose your deserting Mrs. Romaine," he said, "I should ask you if you wouldn't come and keep me company over a lonely dinner at the club, Julian? I suppose you don't want to get rid of him, by any chance?" he continued, turning to Mrs. Romaine.

Mrs. Romaine and Julian laughed simultaneously; Julian with a little touch of embarrassment.

"I'm sure my mother has no objection to getting rid of me," said Julian rather hastily; "but, unfortunately, I'm engaged."

"Engaged!" said Loring. "Lucky fellow, to have engagements at this time of year!"

His tone was a little satirical, and Julian, who was following him out of the room, flushed slightly. His colour was still considerably deeper than usual when he dashed upstairs after seeing Loring out, and put his head in at the drawing-room door.

"I'm afraid I must be off directly, dear," he said carelessly. "I was awfully sorry to get in so late, but Allardyce wanted me."

An hour later, Julian was dining at a restaurant, dining simply, and dining alone. Having finished his dinner, and smoked a cigarette, glancing once or twice at his watch as he did so, he took his hat and coat and strolled out. It was nearly a quarter past eight, and the only light was, of course, the light of the street-lamps and the gas in the shop windows.

He passed along Piccadilly, not quickly, but with the deliberate intention of a man who has a definite destination, until he came to a certain side-street. Then he turned out of Piccadilly, and slackening his steps, sauntered slowly up on the right-hand pavement. He had walked up to the



end of the street, casting sundry glances back over his shoulder as he did so, and was turning once more, as though to saunter down the street again, when the figure of a woman entered at the Piccadilly end. As soon as he saw her, Julian threw away his cigar, and quickening his steps, went to meet her.

The face she raised to his was the face of the girl on whose behalf he had interfered in Piccadilly ten days before, and her first words were uttered in the soft, musical voice that had thanked him then.

"Have you been waiting?" she said; "I'm sorry."

The tone of the few words with which he answered, together with the expression with which he looked at her, showed as clearly as volumes of explanation could have done where and how the new Julian was being developed.

"Only a minute or two," he said. "A lonely fellow like me doesn't mind waiting a few minutes for the chance of a talk, as I've told you before."

She looked up at him with simple, pitying eyes, and a certain wistfulness of expression, too.

"It seems so sad!" she said softly. "But you'll make friends in London soon, I'm sure. Have you been working very hard to-day?"

"Have you been working very hard, is the more important question?" he said, turning his eyes away from those candid brown ones, with, to do him justice, a certain passing shame in his own. "I'm afraid there's no need to ask that! You look awfully tired, Clemence!"

She shook her head with a pretty, brisk movement of reassurance.

"Oh, no!" she said, "it's not been at all a hard day. It never seems hard, you know, when we don't have to stay late, unless something goes wrong in the work-room; and I don't think that happens very often."

There was a simple, genuine content in the tone and manner in which the words were spoken, which, taken in conjunction with the colourlessness of the face, the tired look about the eyes, and the poor, worn dress, told a wonderful little story of patience and serenity of spirit.

All that Julian Romaine knew of Clemence Brymer—the brief and very simple outline of her life as she had told it to him—was comprised in a few by no means uncommon facts. She was a "hand" in one of the big millinery establish-

ments, and had worked at the same place for the last two years. Before that time she had lived from her childhood first with a married brother, and then, when he died, with his widow and children. From a certain touch of reserve in her manner of speaking of those particular years, Julian had gathered that they had been hard ones. The marriage of the brother's widow, and her departure to Australia, had left Clemence alone in London. Her parents, she told Julian, had come from Cambridgeshire; and one of her faint recollections of her father, who had died when she was only five years old, was of sitting on his knee in their little attic room in London, and being told by him about his country home. Her mother had died when she was a baby; and all her scanty recollections seemed to centre round the father, who, as she said simply, had been "a very good man."

The simple trust and confidence in her face as she raised it to Julian now was a curious contrast to the nervous, half-frightened uncertainty of her glance at him on that night in the spring when they had shared for those two or three minutes the shelter of the same portico. But paradoxical as it seems at first, both expressions were the outcome, on different lines, of the same moral characteristic. Clemence, though there was that about her—as her face testified—which kept her, in all unconsciousness and innocence, strangely aloof and apart from her world, had not spent her life in London without learning to know its dangers. But the very purity which made the glances which she was forced to encounter in the streets at night a distress to her; which made the very proximity of an unknown "gentleman" an uneasiness to her; which made theoretical evil, in short, a terror to her; rendered her singularly incapable of recognising its existence on any but the baldest lines. Her confidence was quickly won because, though she was conscious of a world of evil about her, it was as a something large, and black, and obvious that she regarded it. Brought into contact with herself, anything fair-seeming was touched by the whiteness of her own temperament; and, with such unconscious extraneous aid, the thinnest veil was enough to hide from her anything behind. Her confidence once won, might be destroyed, but could hardly be shaken. Something in Julian's face and manner had won it for him, and the outline of his circumstances which he had given her had won him something else—her pity.

Exactly by what motive he had been actuated in his statements to her, Julian would have found it rather hard to say ; as a matter of fact he never asked himself the question. Before the end of their first walk together he had presented himself to her as a medical student living entirely alone in London, having no female friends, or even acquaintances, and wearying often of the rough masculine companionship of his fellows. On these grounds he had asked her when they parted at the end of a little poverty-stricken street near the farther end of the Hammersmith Road, whether he might meet her now and again and walk home with her. She had hesitated for an instant, and then had assented, very simply.

"You haven't had to work late for four nights now," she said, as they turned their backs upon Piccadilly and began to walk steadily in the opposite direction. "Shall you have to to-morrow night, do you think?"

She lifted her eyes to his face as she spoke, and as he looked down and met them it would have been clear to an onlooker what was the charm that those long evening walks possessed for Julian. In the girl's clear eyes there was admiration and absolute reliance. In the look with which he answered them there was conscious superiority and protection.

Just at the moment when he was sore and smarting with a sense of humiliation and futility ; when in his newly-aroused angry discontent all intercourse with women of his own class had become a farce and an inanity to him ; accident had thrown it into his power to create for himself, as it were, a world in which all that had suddenly revealed itself as lacking in his actual life should be lavished upon him. For his acquaintance of Piccadilly he had absolutely no surroundings, except such as he chose to give himself. The Julian Romayne of society, the nonentity, the "figure-head," as he had muttered angrily to himself, had no existence for her. It was Julian's own private Julian, a personality developed side by side with the sudden and violent readjustment of his conception of his relations with the world, who was looked up to, listened to, respected, and deferred to during the hour's walk which lay between that side-street out of Piccadilly and a certain little street out of the Hammersmith Road. A vague, undefined craving for pre-eminence and admiration had risen in him

with his realisation of his dependence, and the reflected nature of the light with which he shone in society. To a weak nature in which that craving has once stirred it matters little by what means it is met, so that it is to some extent satisfied.

The walk of to-night was a repetition of the walks that had preceded it; the talk a little more intimate and a little more personal in tone than any of its predecessors, as that of each of the latter in its turn had been.

In the course of the day something had occurred to remind Clemence of her father and her father's old home, and in intervals of Julian's talk about himself, she told him a good deal about her thoughts of that little country place; of how there had been Brymers here for generations and generations.

"You must have been Puritans once," said Julian, laughing, as he often laughed, at some little grave turn of her speech as he looked into the sweet, serious face. Work-girl as she was, she seemed to have acquired neither the talk nor the voice of her kind. The simple form of her words, her accent, and her gentle voice, seemed to belong to a past, quiet and full of a modest dignity of which the London of the nineteenth century hardly knows. "You would have made an awfully jolly little Puritan, Clemence!"

"I don't know," she said simply; "I was so little when father died. But he felt it dreadfully, I've heard, when he came to London; it nearly broke his heart."

"Why did he do it, then?" said Julian lightly.

"He thought he ought," returned the girl. "You see, there was nothing to do at Feldbourne—nothing but ploughing, and country things, you know. And father thought a man ought to do something—that everything was meant to go on and get better, you know—and that every man ought to help, ought to work. So, of course, he was obliged to come, you see."

They had come to the end of the road now, where they always said good night, and as she spoke she was standing still, looking simply into his face. He looked at her for a moment with something in his eyes which seemed to be struggling vaguely into life side by side with the careless mockery of his "set."

"He was obliged to come, because he thought he ought," he said. "Do you always do what you think you ought, Clemence?"

"I try," she said simply. "Every one tries, I suppose."

He laughed—the laugh that was so like his mother's—but not quite so freely as usual, and held out his hand.

"I don't know about that," he said. "Good night, Clemence."

"Good night," she said.

He hesitated a moment. He never went to meet her without a firm and definite intention of sealing their parting with a kiss. But he had never done so yet, and he did not do it now.

"Good night," he said again, rather lamely; and then they parted, she going quickly and quietly down the street, he passing out of it into the noise and bustle of the Hammersmith Road.

Once there, he paused as though undecided.

"It's too early to go home," he said to himself. "I'll go down to the club for a bit."

There were a good many men in the club-room when he entered it half an hour later—and Julian—quite another young man to the Julian who had walked to the Hammersmith Road—was discussing the latest society topic with much animation over a whisky and seltzer, when Loring, to whom he had nodded at the other end of the room, strolled up to him, cigar in hand.

"Dinner been a failure?" he enquired.

There was nothing particular about the words, and the tone in which they were uttered was singularly, almost significantly, devoid of expression. But there was a keen, satirical expression in his eyes as he fixed them on Julian.

Julian started slightly at the words, and a curious flash of expression passed across his face.

"More or less," he said, with a careless frankness that seemed just a trifle excessive.

"Who was the man?"

"I don't think you know him," said Julian, his carelessness bordering on defiance.

Loring smiled. His smile was never particularly pleasant, and at this moment it was unusually cynical.

"I know a good many men, too," he observed.

## CHAPTER XVI

THE slight alteration in Julian of which Marston Loring was conscious, and a subtly evinced consequence of that alteration—namely, that intimacy with the son no longer involved of necessity even an introduction, far less intimacy, at the mother's house—had no effect whatever upon Loring's relation with Mrs. Romaine, unless, indeed, it might be said to emphasize his position as friend of the house. During the three weeks which followed immediately upon his first call after his return to town, he saw at least as much of Mrs. Romaine as he had done in the course of any previous three weeks since Julian's first introduction of him; though the young man was no longer an obvious and tangible link between them. He dined in Queen Anne Street a few days after his return, but except on that occasion it chanced that he hardly ever met Mrs. Romaine and Julian together. He met the latter often enough at one or other of the clubs, or about town. On the former he called, as in duty bound, after the dinner, and again and yet again at short intervals. She had consulted him about a purchase of old oak, with which she wished to surprise Julian, and the purchase seemed to necessitate in his eyes frequent consultation. He also happened to meet her once or twice when she herself was paying calls.

She was always, apparently, pleased to see him. More pronounced, perhaps, when she met him among other people than when she received him alone, but still always more or less present, there was a certain eager, unconscious assertion of something like intimacy with him about her manner. Marston Loring was quick to observe the new note, and he prided himself likewise on the caution with which he refused to allow it even the value he believed it to possess. He caught her quick recognition of his presence; her tendency to draw him always into the conversation in which she happened to be engaged; the tacit assumption of mutual interests and understanding lurking in her voice; and he sifted and dismissed these things, cynically, as probably meaningless. But astute as he was, he never thought of them in connection with

the constant references to Julian ; the questions as to Julian's doings ; with which her conversations with him were full. Of these latter he took hardly any account — except for an occasional sardonic smile. Clever as he thought himself, there were vast tracts of human nature to which he had no clue, in the very existence of which he disbelieved ; consequently, it was not surprising that he should now and then mistake cause for effect.

At about noon on a bright, cold October day he got out of a hansom at twenty-two, Queen Anne Street, with a certain cynical expectancy on his face. The weeks which had passed since Mrs. Romaine and Julian returned to town on that close September day had brought on winter, and had settled winter society fairly into its grooves ; and on the previous evening Marston Loring and Mrs. Romaine had met at a dinner-party. Mrs. Romaine had been alone. To enquiries made for her son, and regrets at his absence, she had replied, with a gaiety which became absolutely feverish as the evening wore on, that he was unfortunately engaged. Throughout the evening, as though some kind of strain were acting upon her self-control, all the characteristics of her demeanour towards Loring had been slightly exaggerated. Loring had detected, before he had exchanged two sentences with her, that she was not herself ; that she was unstrung and nervous, and arguing on totally false premises he had come to a totally false conclusion. She had pressed him restlessly about the commission he was doing for her, and he had twisted it this morning into an excuse for coming to see her when he knew she would be at home.

"It is an unheard-of hour, I know," he said, as she rose to receive him with an exclamation of surprise. "But I want a little more detail, and one or two measurements, before I can execute your orders satisfactorily."

He had seen before she spoke that the weakness of the night before, from whatever cause it had arisen, had passed away ; the lines about her face were set into a determined, uncompromising cheerfulness, and her voice as she spoke conveyed the same impression.

"It is more than kind of you, and I am very glad to see you," she said. "I'm always glad to see Julian's friend, you know." The last words with a laugh. "You don't happen to have met him this morning, I suppose?"

Loring signified, without a hint of sarcasm, that it was more common not to meet the man one would wish to meet in the Temple than to meet him, and Mrs. Romaine laughed again.

"I know," she said. "But one gets an absurd impression that men doing the same thing in the same place must be always coming across one another. It's very ridiculous, of course. You and he have always had a knack of finding one another out, though. I suppose you are quite one another's greatest chums, aren't you? Is 'chum' still the word, by-the-bye?"

"I believe so," returned Loring carelessly. "Yes," he continued in a different tone, "I don't know when I've taken to any one as I took to Julian."

There was a little gesture, half mocking, half involuntary, which accepted the words as a personal compliment, and Mrs. Romaine said with a smile:

"You are a curious pair of friends, too, are you not? Julian"—her voice in uttering the name seemed to have acquired a new tenderness in the past month, and lingered over it now, evidently unconsciously and involuntarily—"Julian is such a boy, and you are—a great deal older than you ought to be."

She shook her head at him with a reproving laugh, and he answered in his most *blasé* manner:

"I'm a man of the world, you see. I knew it all through and through before Julian had left school. I hope you wouldn't have preferred another boy for his 'chum'!"

There was a daring and a challenge in his tone which made the question personal rather to himself than to Julian; but Mrs. Romaine took it from the other point of view.

"Quite the contrary!" she said quickly. "Another boy would not have been at all the thing for him. I am delighted to think that his mentor is a wise one. I rely on you, Mr. Loring, do you know!"

She stopped abruptly. The last words, uttered suddenly and involuntarily, had seemed curiously charged with a meaning which could not get itself expressed. She paused an instant and then, half as though she wished to laugh some impression away, half as though she wished the words to have significance, she added:

"You'll remember that, won't you? Shall we go down and see about the fittings?"



She rose as she spoke and led the way down to Julian's room. The room was already as perfect as might be. Only a great restlessness, an irrepressible and incessant impulse to give pleasure to its occupant, could have dictated further improvements; and as Mrs. Romaine talked and explained, the same restless instinct of service expressed itself in sundry little involuntary touches to trifles about the room—about Julian's chair and his writing-table.

The door-bell rang at length, and her face, over which that new and weaker expression had stolen, hardened suddenly.

"I'm afraid I must send you away now!" she said, turning to Loring. "I've made an appointment for this morning to get through some bothering business. You understand now just what I want, though, don't you?"

"I think so!" answered Loring reflectively. It would have been strange indeed if he had not understood by this time. "But I'm sorry I must go!"

"I'm sorry too!" said Mrs. Romaine lightly. "I hate business, and it loses none of its solemnity, I can assure you, when it is transacted by my connexion, Dennis Falconer. He is my trustee, you know!"

Loring smiled. He did not detect anything behind her words, and it struck him always as perfectly natural that Mrs. Romaine and her "connexion" should be somewhat antagonistic. "I should imagine he would be a rather ponderous man of business!" he said.

The parlour-maid entered at this moment to announce that Mr. Dennis Falconer was in the drawing-room, and as they left the room Mrs. Romaine turned again to Loring.

"To tell you the truth I find him rather ponderous at all times!" she said with a laugh. "Didn't you say once that altitudes were oppressive? Well, I must go and be oppressed!"

She held out her hand as she spoke, and then paused.

"Oh, by-the-bye," she said, "Julian wants you to come and dine one day next week—only he's so much engaged. Which day will suit you?"

"Thanks!" answered Loring. "I shall be charmed!" His face was quite impassive as he spoke, but he was wondering nevertheless whether Julian had as yet heard of the invitation. From what he had observed lately, he fancied that Julian had reasons of his own for avoiding home engagements. "I am engaged on Tuesday and Thursday," he continued, "but on

any other day I shall be delighted. Did Julian have a successful evening yesterday?"

Mrs. Romaine had explained to him on the previous night with forced merriment that her son was "dining with a fellow, he says!"

"Yes, I think so!" she answered lightly. "I don't know which 'fellow' it was, you know. Well, then, I will send you a note."

They had moved out into the hall as they talked, and now as she paused at the foot of the stairs he shook hands again, and went out of the house as she turned and went up to the drawing-room. Dennis Falconer was standing waiting by the fire.

"Most punctual of men!" she said airily as they shook hands. "How do you do?"

Dennis Falconer had by this time had five months of inaction and ill-health, and the fact that he was heartily weary of both by no means served to soften the natural tendency of his manner towards reserve and severity. In settling down to London life for the winter, too, the fact that he was no longer a new lion gave an added tinge of monotony to existence for him, honestly unconscious as he was of this truth. The days went very heavily with him; he was conscious of having come to a dreary bit of his life's journey, and he endured it conscientiously—if with rather self-conscious self-respect. An added gravity and silence seemed to him under the circumstances by no means to be deprecated.

Under these circumstances the contrast between him and Mrs. Romaine as they exchanged the trivialities of the situation was inexpressible, and it was not surprising that they touched almost instantly upon the business which was the cause of their interview. It was not a long affair; it turned upon Mrs. Romaine's desire to have rather more ready money at her command; and Dennis Falconer, having explained the situation to her; having stated his views, evidently conscientiously compelled thereto; and having entered a formal protest against her instructions; returned to his pocket the note-book to which he had been referring as if to emphasize the close of the matter. Then he paused.

Mrs. Romaine had drawn a quick, slight breath of relief at his action, but the breath seemed to suspend itself for an instant on this pause, and the eyes with which she watched his were very bright and intent.

"As your only near relative," he began with formal gravity, "and as your son's only near relative, I feel myself bound to take this opportunity of approaching a subject which has been in my thoughts for some time. Any man of ordinary knowledge and experience of the world, having regard only to the most ordinary circumstances, would tell you that so large an allowance as you make your son is not an advisable thing for any young man."

Mrs. Romaine had listened with her expression veiled and repressed into an intent vigilance, and as he finished a dull flush—which was none the less hot and significant because it had not the vivid intensity of the angry flush of youth—crept into her face, and her eyes glittered. Her tone as she spoke witnessed to a strong self-control, and an intense determination not to abandon her position or to lessen by one jot the distance she had set between them.

"I am sorry you think so!" she said carelessly.

"I think so, emphatically," he returned. "I should think so for any young man. For William Romaine's son——"

Mrs. Romaine had been gathering up some papers from the table with light, careless movements; she rose now rather suddenly but still carelessly. What seemed to him almost shameful callousness quickened Falconer into what he thought a righteous disregard for all conventionality.

He too rose, but his movement was no response to hers; rather it seemed to crush and dominate its suggestion of easy dismissal with the implacable austerity of a reality not to be put aside. He stood looking at her, forcing her, by the suddenly asserted superiority of his man's determination and mental weight, to meet his grave, condemning eyes.

"Does your son know what his father was?" he said in a low, stern voice.

He had forced down the barrier, he had annihilated the distance, and she faced him with glittering eyes, that dull flush all over her face, its mask gone.

"No!" she said, and from her hard, defiant voice, also, all artificiality had dropped away.

"He knows nothing of his danger; he has no safeguards, and he has money at his command which would be temptation to any young man. Think what you are doing!"

For a couple of seconds they confronted one another, separated by no conventionalities, man and woman, with the

common memory of a common horror between them, holding them together in spite of every obstacle which temperament and habit, mental and moral, could interpose.

Then with a tremendous effort the woman's strength reasserted itself, and by sheer force of her will she thrust away the horrible reality which he had forced upon her. She laughed.

"I really don't know what we are talking about!" she said. "I am sure you mean most kindly as to my spoilt boy's allowance, but we won't trouble to discuss it! So good of you to take the trouble to think of it—and so unnecessary!"

For a moment Falconer gazed at her almost petrified with amazement and disgust. His perceptive and imaginative faculties had not developed with the passing of years; his mental processes were slow; and for all their ghastly exaggeration he accepted the careless, shallow artificiality of her tone and manner, and the smiling unfeelingness of the rebuff she had given him, exactly as they appeared upon the surface. It was some seconds, even, before he thoroughly realised how ruthlessly and completely she had imputed to him all the attributes of a meddler; and as he did so an added distance touched the uncompromising sternness which had gradually settled down upon his face.

"I beg your pardon!" he said, and the formal, unmeaning words seemed, in their enforced condescension to her level, to carry with them a lofty condemnation which was even contempt. "Good day!" he added stiffly; and then, not seeing, apparently, the hand she extended to him with a hard, smiling "Good-bye," he left the room.

Mrs. Romaine's face remained curiously blanched-looking all the afternoon, as though she had received some kind of shock. She spent the afternoon in paying calls, and whenever she returned alone to her carriage there crept back into her eyes—bright and eager as she talked and laughed—a certain haunting questioning, not to be driven quite away by any simulation of gaiety.

As her afternoon's work drew to a close, her eyes were no longer quite free from it, even as she made her attractive conversation, and when she rose to bring her last visit to an end she was looking very tired. She was just shaking hands with her hostess when Mrs. Halse was announced.

To spare herself one iota of what she considered her social duty—even when that duty took the form of civility to a woman

she disliked—was not Mrs. Romaine's way. With exactly the exclamation of pleasure and surprise which the situation demanded she waited, pleasantly desirous of exchanging greetings with the new-comer, while Mrs. Halse bore down vociferously upon the mistress of the house. Mrs. Halse had only very recently returned to town, and there was all the excitement of novelty about her appearance. She was a good deal louder even than usual, partly as the result of this excitement, and partly as the result of absence from town; and she had also grown considerably stouter. Announcements of this fact, lamentations, and explanations mingled with her greetings of her hostess, and were still upon her lips when she turned to Mrs. Romaine.

"Abominable, isn't it?" she said, pouring out her words as fast as they would come, and without waiting for any answers. "Such a trial! I suppose I shall have to go in for Turkish baths or something horrible of that sort. And how is everybody? How is that wicked young man of yours, Mrs. Romaine? I heard of his goings on at the Ponsonbys'! By-the-bye, do tell him that Hilda Newton is engaged to be married. So good for him! No doubt he thinks she is pining away. A very good match, too—young Compton; rich and good-looking; rather a fool, but don't tell Master Julian that."

Master Julian's mother was smiling so charmingly that it was with some difficulty that Mrs. Halse, who, with the assistance of Miss Newton, had guessed the substance of the conversation which had actually taken place between the mother and son in the railway carriage during their journey from Norfolk, had some slight difficulty in restraining the ejaculation, "Cat!"

"Really!" was the suave answer. "Miss Newton is really engaged, and so well. So glad! Such a charming girl! Yes, I'll tell Julian, certainly. His heart will be broken—temporarily. Fortunately his fancies are as ephemeral as they are numerous. Good-bye! So glad to have seen you."

She pressed Mrs. Halse's hand cordially as she spoke, and pursued her graceful way to the door.

Julian was dining out again that night, and her lonely evening apparently affected his mother's nerves. At any rate, Julian received a message the next morning—a Sunday—to the effect that she had slept badly and was resting, but would see him at lunch, and at lunch-time accordingly she appeared.

She laughed at his half-careless, half-affectionate enquiries,

calling herself quite rested and quite well. And after his first enquiries as to her health, Julian relapsed into rather moody silence—silence with which his mother had apparently nothing to do. That tone of independence which had come to him, and which was sometimes hardly perceptible, could hardly have been more strongly evidenced than by his one or two spasmodic efforts to pass out of his own life—where something was evidently not to his liking—into the life they shared.

Such a state of things is always more or less disturbing to the mental atmosphere; more or less according to the sensitiveness of the person upon whom it acts; and as Mrs. Romaine sat opposite Julian the furtive glances which she cast at his moody, preoccupied face became more and more anxious and restless. A tentative, uncertain tone in her manner of dealing with him, which had developed during the last month, increased moment by moment; and her voice and laugh as she chatted to him—ignoring his indifferent reception of her little bits of news—became moment by moment more forced and unreal. That her nerves and her self-control were not so reliable as they had once been was evident in the fact that she took refuge—as was not unusual with her in these days—in painful exaggeration.

Her bright little flow of talk stopped at last, however; and Julian making no attempt to fill the gap, there was total silence. It was broken again by Mrs. Romaine, and she was talking now, evidently, for talking's sake, as though she was no longer capable of weighing her words; but, in her intense desire to penetrate the vague atmosphere which she could not challenge, was making her advances blindly.

"I met Mrs. Halse yesterday," she began gaily. "Did I tell you? Fortunately I only encountered her for a few moments, or I doubt whether I should be alive to tell the tale."

She paused, and Julian smiled absently. They had finished lunch, and he had risen and strolled to the fire with a cigarette, and he was thinking vaguely, as her voice broke in upon his meditations—or perhaps rather feeling than thinking—that his mother was rather artificial. All society women were artificial, he had thought once or twice lately; and the word was acquiring a new significance to him.

"She bestowed an immense amount of conversation upon me in the course of those few minutes!" continued Mrs. Romaine in the sprightly tone which her son was beginning to

hear for the first time as something jarring. "Amongst other things she told me a little piece of news which will interest you."

"Yes?" said Julian indifferently.

A fellow didn't always want to be entertained, he was saying to himself irritably; it was a nuisance. His thoughts had wandered completely, and he was going over a fruitless hour which he had spent alone walking up and down a certain side-street off Piccadilly, on the previous evening—an hour which was accountable for his gloomy humour this morning—when he became aware of his mother's voice saying with insistent gaiety:

"Well, sir, aren't you broken-hearted?"

Julian started and made a futile effort to realise what his mother had said. The necessity for the effort and its failure proved by no means soothing to him, and he said rather impatiently:

"I'm awfully sorry, mother, but I'm afraid I didn't hear."

"He didn't hear!" echoed Mrs. Romaine in mock appeal to heaven and earth to witness the fact. She, too, had made an effort and a failure, and the result with her was to increase her nervous recklessness. "Five weeks ago he was ready to eat his poor little mother because she prevented his proposing to this young woman, and now when I tell him she's engaged he doesn't even hear! Perhaps you've forgotten Hilda Newton's very existence, my lord! Who is her successor?"

Julian flushed angrily, and his good-looking face took a sullen expression.

"She's not likely to have a successor, as you call it," he said. "A fellow doesn't care to have that kind of thing happen twice."

His mother broke into a thin, nervous laugh.

"You don't mean to say it rankles still!" she said gaily.

"Is this the reason of your devotion to work and 'fellows'?" You silly old boy, you ought to be thoroughly glad of your escape by this time! I think I shall follow Dennis Falconer's advice, and cut down your allowance to teach you reason. Shall I?"

The jest, dragged in as it was, had a forced ring about it; perhaps it bore all-unconscious testimony to the oppressively insistent power of that haunting questioning of yesterday. But Julian, knowing nothing of this, was simply conscious of ever-increasing irritation from her voice and manner.

"I don't see what business my allowance is of Dennis

Falconer's!" he said gruffly. And then side by side with his growing sense of his mother's artificiality, there grew in him an overmastering desire for another woman's presence—a simple presence, to which social subtleties and affectation were unknown. Why hadn't Clemence met him yesterday evening? How could he tell when he would see her again? To-morrow he could not meet her. Then his reflections paused, as it were, absorbed in a vague sense of discomfort and discontent, until a fresh thought stole across them; a thought which presented itself by no means for the first time that day.

Why should he not go and see her this afternoon? After all, why should he not? He never had done such a thing, but—did it mean so much as it seemed to mean? And if it did? Why not?

"I don't see either," his mother said; and Julian smiled grimly as he thought how little she knew the question she was answering. "It's our business, isn't it? And it's my private business to find you a nice wife—not yours at all, you understand." These last words with a laugh. "She must be pretty, I suppose—good style at any rate—and she must be rich, and she must have the makings of a good hostess in her. Really, I think I must begin to look her out. Don't you think—"

Julian interrupted her. He was hardly conscious that he was doing so; he had hardly heard her words; but the atmosphere of the perfectly appointed room, with its artificial mistress, had suddenly become absolutely intolerable to him, and he had answered his own question suddenly and recklessly.

"I'm going out, mother," he said. "I've got some calls to make, and it's getting late. You won't go out this afternoon, I know. Good-bye."

He was gone almost before she had realised that he was going.

To Mrs. Romaine it was a repetition of their first evening at home together in the autumn. The nervous excitement under which she had been acting died suddenly away, and she realised what had happened; realised it, and sat for a moment staring at it, as it were, her hands clenched on the tablecloth, her face haggard and drawn.

To Julian it was no repetition. It was a new departure, sudden and unpremeditated, and as he walked away from his mother's house his face was alight and eager with excitement and determination.



## CHAPTER XVII

ON finding himself condemned to twelve months in London, Dennis Falconer had debated the question of where he should live at some length ; and had finally decided on returning to some rooms in the neighbourhood of the Strand, in which he had been wont to establish himself during his temporary residences in London for the past fifteen years. It was not a fashionable part of London. Falconer was a richer man now than he had been fifteen years before, and there were sundry luxuries to be had in those quarters of London where wealthy bachelors congregate, which were not recognised so far south of Piccadilly. It was also natural to him to think twice before he abandoned the idea of living where it was "the proper thing"—of the hour—to live. But he was known and respected in his old rooms ; he would be received there with deferential delight ; he would be of the first importance in his landlady's estimation ; and these things, little as he knew it, had a distinct influence on his decision.

The two rooms which he occupied, on the first floor, bore a strong likeness to the majority of first-floor rooms in the same street, occupied by single gentlemen. These gentlemen were not, as a rule, of the class who think it worth while to impress their artistic character upon the room in which they live ; as a whole, indeed, they might have been said to lack artistic character. Here and there was a more inveterate smoker, newspaper-reader, or novel-reader, as the case might be, the sign manual of whose tastes was not to be obliterated. But as a rule it was the landlady's taste that reigned supreme and monotonous.

Dennis Falconer's rooms were no exception to the rule. The furniture was very comfortable, very solid, and very ugly, in the style of thirty years ago ; an artistic temperament would have modified the whole appearance of the room, insensibly and necessarily, in the course of a week. But Falconer was not even conscious that anything was wrong. He was as nearly devoid of æsthetic sense, even on its broadest

lines, as it is possible for a civilised man to be ; and the state of mind which takes pleasure in the tone of curtains and carpets, and the form of tables, chairs, or china, was to him incomprehensible, and consequently a little contemptible.

On a November morning, with an incipient yellow fog hanging about, the appearance of the room in which breakfast was waiting for him was calculated to cast a gloom over a temperament never so little open to such influences ; and Dennis Falconer as he opened his bedroom door and came slowly out, looked as though his mental atmosphere was already sufficiently heavy. He always breakfasted punctually at nine o'clock, and he never went to bed before one ; it simply never occurred to him to make any concession to the emptiness of his present life by spending more than seven hours out of the twenty-four in sleep, even if he had been physically able to do so. And there were days when the intervening seventeen hours hung on his hands with an almost unendurable weight. He had never been a man who readily made friends, and his tendency in this direction had steadily decreased as he grew older, so that the few men with whom he was intimate were friends of his early manhood ; and, as it happened, none of these intimates were in England at the moment. He was absolutely incapable of forming those cheery, unmeaning acquaintanceships which make the savour of life to so many unoccupied men. He was one of those men with whom no one thinks of becoming familiar ; who is vaguely supposed either to have a private and select circle of friends, or to be sufficient for himself ; whose demeanour, correct, self-contained, and a trifle formal, seems to hold the world at a distance. Consequently his intercourse with his fellow-creatures was limited by his present life to slight conversation on the topics of the day at his club, or in various drawing-rooms where he paid grave, stiff calls, or attended stately functions. Cut off from his own particular work he had no interests and no pursuits.

It was a dreary life in truth, and it was little wonder that Falconer's expression grew rather more austere with every week. The sentiments of a man of his temperament towards a world in which there seemed so little place for him, and from which he could derive so little satisfaction, would inevitably tend towards stern disapproval.

On this particular morning the sense of dreariness was

very heavy upon him. On the previous day he had had an interview with the great doctor to whose fiat he owed his detention in London. The great doctor had been indefinite and unsatisfactory; had looked grave and talked vaguely about troublesome complications and a possible necessity of complete repose. Falconer had made no sign of discomposure, had taken his leave with his usual courteous gravity, and had left the consulting-room with a cold chill at his heart. The cold chill was about it still this morning as he walked to his window before going to the breakfast-table, and stood there looking blankly out. What he was really looking at was the prospect before him if, as the doctor had hinted, he should have to lie up for a time. A lodging and a nurse, or a hospital; solitude and confinement in either case.

He sighed heavily, and turning as though with the instinct to turn away from his troubles, he sat down to the table, poured out his coffee, and took up the letters lying by his plate. There were only two—one in a common-looking envelope directed in an illiterate hand, the other in a clear, characteristic man's hand, at the sight of which his face brightened perceptibly.

"Aston," he said to himself, and opened it quickly.

His friendship for the little doctor, which time had only served to strengthen, was, perhaps, the most genial sentiment of Dennis Falconer's life, and Dr. Aston's absence in India at this particular period had been a bitter disappointment to him. He had hoped for some time that the doctor's plans—always of a somewhat erratic nature—might bring him back to London shortly; and as his eyes fell on the first sentence of the letter a slight sound of intense relief escaped him; an eloquent testimony to his present loneliness. Dr. Aston began by telling him that he would be in England before Christmas.

The letter was long and interesting; it abounded in bits of vivid description and shrewd observation, and its comments on Falconer's proceedings were keen and kindly. Its recipient allowed himself to become absorbed in it to the total neglect of his breakfast, and his expression was lighter than it had been for weeks when he came upon these sentences towards the close of the letter:

"By-the-bye, in the 'latest intelligence' of London society—all is fish in the shape of human nature that comes to my net, as you know, and I study that curious institution carefully

whenever I get the chance—I constantly, nowadays, come across the name of a Mrs. Romaine. ‘The charming Mrs. Romaine and her good-looking son’ is the usual formula. It is not by any chance the little woman with whom I got myself and you into such a terrible fix years and years ago at Nice—William Romaine’s widow? Is it any relation? I should like to know what became of that little woman, if you can tell me; she had stuff in her. And whether the boy has dreed his weird yet?”

Falconer laid down the letter abruptly, and turned to his breakfast, his face stern and uncompromising. His interview with Mrs. Romaine, now a fortnight old, had accentuated markedly his grim disapprobation of her; and the strong feeling of reprobation that stirred him then had so little subsided that the least touch was enough to re-endow it with vigorous life.

“Stuff in her!” he muttered, with a world of contempt in the curt ejaculation. “Stuff in her! If Aston only knew!”

He glanced at the letter again, and a certain disapproval, personal to the writer, expressed itself in the grave set of his lips as he re-read the words about Julian; his whole mental and moral attitude was antagonistic to, and inclined to condemn, what he characterised, now, as “Aston’s dangerous theories.” He passed with what seemed to him practical sense from “Aston’s extravagance” to a stern consideration of the heinousness of such a life and education as Julian’s for a young man in Julian’s position. Julian’s position, rightly considered, involved in his eyes a reaping in obscurity, humility, and sombreness of life of the harvest of shame and disgrace which his father had sown; and that there was anything inconsistent between this view of the case and his condemnation of Dr. Aston’s theories he was utterly unaware.

He applied himself to his breakfast, still meditating on Mrs. Romaine and the probable consequences of her callousness; and then he took up the other letter and opened it.

At the opening of his last expedition, one of the men attached to it had met with a disabling accident, and had been sent home. The man had been with Falconer on a previous expedition, and when the latter returned to England he had made enquiries about him, and had finally, and with no little difficulty, traced him out to find him crippled for life, and in a state of abject poverty. Falconer, according to his narrow

and orthodox lights, as strictly conventional in their way as were Mrs. Romaine's in hers, was a good man. The letter he was reading now, from the wife of this man, was written by a woman by whom he was regarded as a kind of Providence; to be revered indeed, not loved, but to be revered with all her heart. She and her husband had been rescued by him from despair; all that medical skill could do for the man had been done at his expense. The pair had been settled by him in a small house in Camden Town, where Mrs. Dixon, a brisk, capable woman, was to let lodgings. To this house Falconer had been once or twice to see the crippled man; and he was not now surprised to receive from the wife the information—conveyed in a style in which natural loquacity struggled with awe of her correspondent—that the husband had had one of the bad attacks of suffering to which he was liable, and that if Mr. Falconer could spare half an hour, Dixon would “take it very kind with his duty.”

Falconer smiled grimly at the words “if Mr. Falconer could spare half an hour.” His whole day was practically at Dixon's disposal. He would go up to Camden Town that afternoon, he decided; he almost wished he had thought of going before, and as the thought crossed his mind, the remembrance of what might possibly be lying in wait for himself in the not very distant future made him rise abruptly and thrust his letters into his pocket.

It was about twelve o'clock when he left his rooms and walked slowly away in the direction of club-land. He usually got through an hour or so at his club before lunch, reading the papers and so forth. The threatening fog of three hours earlier had rolled away, and there were gleams of wintry sunshine about which made walking pleasant. Dr. Aston's letter had cheered Falconer considerably; the feeling, too, that he had a definite occupation for his afternoon, and an occupation which was not invented, was invigorating; and altogether he was in better spirits than he had been for many a day. He was walking up Waterloo Place, when his eyes, which could not forego, even in a London street, their trained habits of keen, accurate observation, lighted on Marston Loring, who was coming down Waterloo Place on the opposite side of the road. Loring was a man Dennis Falconer particularly disliked, and after one disapproving glance he was looking away, when he saw the other suddenly stop with a movement—and evidently an

exclamation—of surprise and welcome. In the same instant he became aware that Julian Romaine had turned out of a side-street, and was greeting his friend apparently with effusion. Falconer's brow clouded involuntarily. The instinct of kin was so strong in him that there was a certain touch of personal feeling, little as he wished it, in his connection with the Romaines, which made the thought of them particularly disagreeable to him ; and here, for the second time to-day, the young man and his mother were forced upon his notice. He pursued his way up the street, watching Julian grimly, and as he passed, still on the opposite pavement, the corner where the two young men were standing, Julian happened to look across, saw him, and made a ready, courteous gesture of salutation. Falconer returned it stiffly enough, and walked on.

Julian turned to Loring with a laugh.

"Old bear !" he said ; "I wish he'd take himself off to Africa or somewhere. He's a regular wet blanket to have about ! Well, old fellow, and what's the news ?"

Julian was looking very fresh, vigorous, and full of life. There was a curious suggestion about him of alertness which was not without a certain excitement ; and his tone and manner as he spoke were almost superabundantly frank and loquacious.

Ten days before, Loring had received a note from Mrs. Romaine telling him that Julian was going for a week's holiday to Brighton, and that the alteration in his room must be completed if possible in his absence. "It is a sudden idea with him, apparently," she had written ; "but do let us take advantage of it."

If Loring had had his own private notion on the subject of this sudden idea on Julian's part he had made no sign to Julian's mother ; he had paid, in silence, his cynical tribute to the maternal wisdom which had presumably recognised the fact that if freedom is not granted it will be snatched.

Three days had now passed since Julian's return, but it had happened—he himself could perhaps have told how—that until this Saturday afternoon he and Loring had not met. There was nothing in his face and manner at this moment, however, but the most lively, even demonstrative satisfaction ; and without giving Loring time to answer his question he went on, with an ease and gaiety which were very like, and yet unlike, his mother.

"Where were you off to ? The club ? Come and have

some lunch with me, do ! I want to tell you how first-rate I think my room. I hear you've taken no end of trouble over it. It was awfully jolly of you, old man !”

“Glad you like it,” returned Loring nonchalantly. “Yes, I think it's nice. But it was Mrs. Romaine who took the trouble.”

He was studying Julian keenly, though quite imperceptibly, as he spoke. The young man's manner was assumed—of that Loring was quite aware. But what, exactly, did it hide ? What exactly was the secret ?

He debated this question calmly with himself throughout the lunch which they took together a little later on ; interposing question and remarks the while into Julian's flow of fluent talk and laughter. About Brighton, in particular, Julian was full of chatter ; and as he wound up a vivacious description of his doings there, Loring commented mentally :

“He hasn't been to Brighton at all !”

Aloud he said, as genially as nature ever allowed him to speak :

“Well, it's very jolly to see you back again, my boy. Do you know we've seen next to nothing of one another lately, and I vote we turn over a new leaf, eh ? What are you going to do this afternoon, now ?”

He was leaning back in his chair lighting a cigarette as he spoke, and apparently his attention was wholly claimed by the process ; as a matter of fact, however, he was studying Julian's face intently, and his sense of annoyance was not untinged with admiration when not a muscle of that good-looking face moved. Julian leant back and crossed his legs airily.

“I promised to go to the Eastons', I'm sorry to say !” he said. “It's an awful bore ! We might have done a theatre together !”

Now, the Eastons were mutual acquaintances of the two men, but it so happened that they had taken irremediable offence against Loring over some detail connected with the bazaar, and it was no longer possible for him to call upon them. Julian was of course aware of the fact, and Loring smiled cynically at what he recognised as a very clever move.

“A pity !” he said composedly. “Better luck another time. Well, you're not in any hurry, anyway.”

“Not a bit !” assented Julian, cheerfully disposing of himself in a most comfortable and stationary attitude. But a

moment later he sprang to his feet. "By Jove!" he exclaimed, "I nearly forgot! I've got a commission to do for my mother in Bond Street—shop closes at two. Can I do it?"

A hurried reference to his watch assured him that he would just do it, and with a hasty farewell he dashed out of the room. Loring did not propose to accompany him. It was not worth while, he told himself; and he smiled sardonically as Julian departed.

"I shall find out," he said to himself. "Of course I shall find out! The question is, is it worth while to wait, or shall I play my game with what I know? The attached friend of the boy warning his mother in time"—he smiled again very unpleasantly—"or the sympathising friend of the mother having made a terrible discovery! Which is the better pose? The latter, I think. Yes, the latter! I'll wait until I've made my discovery."

He dropped the end of his cigarette into an ash-tray, sat for a moment more in deep thought, and then rose and strolled slowly away.



## CHAPTER XVIII

JULIAN, meanwhile, hailed a passing hansom, sprang into it, and told the man to drive, not to Bond Street but to the Athenæum, Camden Town. There was an air about him as of one who plumes himself on having done a clever thing, and as he settled himself for his long drive there was a curious excitement and radiance in his face. When the cab reached its destination at last he jumped out and walked rapidly and eagerly away.

It was not a neighbourhood likely to be familiar to a young man about town, but Julian pursued his way with the certainty of a man who had followed it several times before. In about ten minutes he turned into a neat and respectable little street, consisting of two short rows of small houses with diminutive bow windows to the first-floor rooms. About half-way down he stopped at a house on the right-hand side and knocked with a quick, decided touch. He was an object of the deepest interest as he stood upon the little doorstep to a brisk, curious-looking woman who was standing in the ground-floor window of the house opposite, but her opportunity for observation was brief. The door was opened almost immediately, and with a pleasant greeting to the woman, who stood aside, he passed her and ran upstairs—a course of action evidently expected of him. He opened the door of the front room on the first floor and went eagerly in.

“Here I am!” he cried. “Did you expect me so soon?”

Standing in the middle of the room, as though she had suddenly started from her chair, with her hands outstretched towards him, was Clemence; and on the third finger of that thin, left hand there shone a bright gold ring.

Her face was a delicate rosy red, as though with sudden joy just touched with shyness, and all the beauty which had been latent in her tired, work-worn face seemed to have been touched into vivid, almost startling life, by the hand of a great magician. By contrast with the face she turned to Julian now, the large eyes deep and glowing, the mouth trembling a little with tenderness, the face of a month ago, pure and sweet as it had

been, would have looked like the inanimate mask of a dormant soul. The soul was awake now, quivering with consciousness; womanhood had come with a purity and beauty beyond any possibility of girlhood. Looking at her face now, it was easy to see by what means alone the latent strength of her character might be developed.

He drew her into his arms with an eager, confident touch, and she yielded to him completely, clinging to him with the colour deepening in her face as he kissed it boyishly again and again. It was a fortnight only since he had kissed her first.

"I was watching for you," she said softly. "I heard your step."

He laughed exultantly and kissed her again.

"I thought you'd be watching!" he said. "Though I'm earlier than I told you, do you know? Much earlier! I say, Clemence, how jolly the room looks!"

It was a small room, furnished and decorated in the simplest and cheapest style; as great a contrast as could well be imagined to the rooms to which he was accustomed. But it was very clean and very comfortable-looking; and there was a homelike, restful atmosphere about it which might well have radiated from the slender figure in the plain dress, with that shining wedding-ring and lovely, flushing face. She smiled, a very sweet, pleased little smile.

"Do you think so, really?" she said. "I am so glad. It is that beautiful basket-chair you sent, and the flowers." She glanced as she spoke at a pot of chrysanthemums standing on a little table in the window. Then she turned to him again, her eyes a little deprecating. "Do you think you ought to spend so much money?" she said shyly.

Julian laughed, and flung his arm round her, as he surveyed the little room with a vivid air of proprietorship. Here he was master. Here his word was law. Here he was in a world of his own making, and his only fellow-creature was his subject.

"It looks jolly!" he pronounced again as a final dictum. "Now, come and sit down, Clemence, and tell me what you've been doing since yesterday!" He settled himself into the arm-chair by the fire with a lordly air as he spoke, adding: "Come and sit on this stool by me, like the sweetest girl in the world."

Clemence hesitated, hardly perceptibly. Hers was a nature

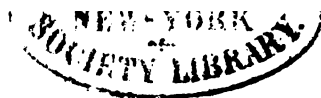
to which trivial endearments came strangely, almost painfully. She had not yet learned to caress in play ; and there was an innate, unconscious personal dignity about her to which trivial self-abasement was unnatural. But almost before she was conscious of her reluctance there swept over her, like a great wave of hot sweetness, the remembrance that she was his wife ! It was her duty to do as he wished. She came softly across the room, sat down on the stool he had drawn out, and laid her cheek against his arm.

It was a trivial action, very quietly performed, but it was instinct with the beauty of absolute self-abnegation ; and as if, as her physical presence touched him, something of her spirit touched him too, a sudden quiet fell upon the exultant, self-satisfied boy at whose feet she sat. Not for the first time, by any means, there stole over Julian a vague uneasiness ; a vague realisation of something beyond his ken ; something in the light of which he shrank, unaccountably, from himself. His hand closed round the woman's hand lying in his with a touch very different from the boyish passion of his previous caresses, and for a moment he did not speak. Then he said slowly and in a low, dreamy voice :

"Clemence, I can't think why you should ever have loved me !"

The hand in his thrilled slightly, and the head on his shoulder was just shaken. Clemence could not tell him why she loved him. The bald outline she could trace as most women can trace it. She could look back upon her first sense of reliance, her pity, her admiration, her sense of strange, delightful companionship ; but the why and wherefore of it, the mystery which had given to this young man and no other the key of her soul, this was to her as a miracle ; as, indeed, there is always something miraculous in it, even when it seems most natural. To account for love ; to say that in this case it is natural, in this case it is unnatural ; is to confess ignorance of the first great attribute of love—that it is supernatural and divine.

There was another silence, a longer one this time, and the strange spell sank deeper into Julian's spirit. He said nothing. It would have been a relief to him to speak ; to reduce to words, or, indeed, to definite consciousness, the vague trouble that oppressed him ; but its outlines were too large and too vague for him. It was in truth a sense of total moral insolvency,



but he could not understand it as such, having no moral standpoint. Clemence neither moved nor spoke; her hand lay motionless in his; her cheek rested against him; her beautiful eyes looked straight before them with a dreamy, almost awe-struck gaze.

At last, with a desperate determination to thrust away so unusual an oppression, Julian moved slightly and began to talk. He wanted to get back his sense of superiority, and his voice accordingly took its most boyish and masterful tone.

"You haven't told me what you've been doing, Clemence?" he said. "Have you given notice at your bonnet shop as I told you?"

Clemence lifted her head and sat up, clasping her hands lightly on the arm of his chair.

"No!" she said gently. "I thought I would ask you to think about it again. I would so much rather go on if you didn't mind. For one thing, what could I do all day?" She looked up into his face as she spoke with deprecating, pleading eyes, which were full of submission, too; and the submission was very pleasant to Julian.

"I do mind," he said authoritatively. "I can't have it, Clemence. I can't always see you home, don't you see, and I won't have you about at night alone. Besides, I don't choose that you should work."

"But I do so want to!" she said, laying her hand timidly and beseechingly on his. "It will be so difficult for you to keep us both; you will overwork yourself, I'm so afraid. Oh, won't you let me help? I've always worked, you know; it doesn't hurt me. You don't want to forget that you've married a work-girl, do you?"

She smiled at him as she spoke, one of her sweet, rare smiles, and he kissed her impetuously.

"Don't talk nonsense!" he said imperiously. "I can't allow it, and that's all about it. How do you suppose I could attend to my work when I'm kept at the hospital in the evening, if I were thinking all the time of you alone in the streets! No, you must give notice on Monday!"

She looked at him wistfully for a moment. He was condemning her to long days of idleness, to constant uneasiness and self-reproach on his behalf, to a certain loss of self-respect. But self-sacrifice was instinctive with her.

"Very well!" she said simply.

The little victory, the assertion of authority restored Julian's spirits completely, and he plunged into discursive talk; more or less egotistical. It was all, necessarily, founded on falsehood, and it would have been a delicate question to decide when his talk ceased to be consciously untruthful, and became the expression of a fictitious Julian in whom the real Julian absolutely believed.

The afternoon wore on; the winter twilight fell, bringing with it a slight return of the fog of the morning; two hours had passed before Julian moved reluctantly, and said that he must go.

"I shall come to-morrow!" he said, taking her face between his hands and kissing it. "We'll go out into the country if it's fine. I wish it were summer-time! Have you ever seen the river, Clemence?"

"Not in the country," she said. "It must be nice! How much you've seen! Do you know I often think that you must wish sometimes I was a lady! I don't know anything and I haven't seen anything, and——" she faltered, and he rose, laughing and drawing her up into his arms.

"Any one can know things," he said lightly, "and any one can see things. But no one but you can be Clemence! Do you see? Oh, what a bore it is to have to go!"

He was lingering, undecidedly, as though a little pressure would have scattered his resolution to the winds, and seated him once more in the chair he had just quitted. But, since he had said that he must go, it never occurred to Clemence to ask him to stay. If it were not his duty he would never leave her. If it was his duty now, how could she hold him back!

"To-morrow will come!" she said, looking into his face with a brave smile.

"I don't believe you want me to stay!" he returned, half laughing, half vexed.

"Don't I?" she said simply, and he caught her in his arms again.

"What a shame!" he said. "There, good-bye! Are you coming to the door?"

She shook her head.

"I'll stay here," she said, "and watch you from the window. I see you farther so. Ah, it's rather foggy! I'm so sorry! You'll look up? Good-bye!"

She lifted her face to his and kissed him tenderly and shyly, and he left her standing by the window.

Julian ran downstairs, let himself out, and stood for a moment on the doorstep as he realised the disagreeable nature of the atmosphere. At the same instant the door of the house opposite opened, and a man came out, attended to the threshold by a woman. She caught sight of Julian instantly, and said something to the man, as he stood in the shadow, in a deferential whisper. Julian shook himself, confounded the fog, and then glanced up at the window from which the light streamed on his face. He waved his hand, turned away, and walked rapidly down the street, pulling up his coat collar as he went.

As he went, Dennis Falconer slowly descended the two steps of that opposite house, and slowly—very slowly—followed him.

## CHAPTER XIX

"GOOD-BYE! So glad to have seen you! What, dear Mrs. Ponsonby, are you going to run away too? So kind of you to come out on such an afternoon! Good-bye!"

It was a Friday afternoon, and Friday was Mrs. Romaine's "day." This particular Friday had been about as unpleasant, atmospherically, as it is possible for even a November day to be, short of actual dense fog; it had been very dark, and a drizzling rain—a dirty rain too—had fallen unceasingly. Under these circumstances it was rather surprising that any one should have ventured out, even in the most luxurious brougham, than that Mrs. Romaine's visitors should have been comparatively few in number.

The departure of the ladies to whom her farewells had been spoken, and with whom she had been exchanging social commonplaces for the last quarter of an hour, left her alone; and as she returned to her chair by the dainty tea-table and poured herself out a cup of tea, she had apparently very little expectation of further callers, though it was only just past five o'clock; for when the door-bell rang a few minutes later she paused, and a look of surprise crossed her face. She put down her cup with a little sigh, which was more a concession made to the dictum of conventionality that callers are a bore than an expression of real feeling; and then, as the door opened, she rose with a touch of genuine satisfaction.

"My dear Mrs. Pomeroy!" she exclaimed. "How sweet of you to come out on such a shocking day! Really, you must have had an intuition of my forlorn condition, I think! Maud, dear, how are you?"

She had given her left hand to the girl in a familiar, caressing way as she retained Mrs. Pomeroy's right hand, and now she drew the elder lady with charming insistence towards a large, inviting-looking chair, indicating to the daughter with a pretty gesture that she was to take a low seat near the table.

"It is an ill wind that blows no one any good!" she continued gaily, as Mrs. Pomeroy greeted her placidly. "It

is really too delightful to get you all to myself like this ! How seldom one gets the chance of a cosy chat ! And how very seldom it comes with the people of all others with whom one would thoroughly enjoy it ! You'll have some tea, won't you—oh, yes, you really must ; it is so much more friendly !” She laughed as she spoke, and turned to the girl sitting demurely on the low seat near her with a tacit claim on her sympathy and comprehension which was very fascinating. Miss Pomeroy's pretty, expressionless lips smiled sweetly, and her mother, who was always ready to yield to pressure where a cup of tea was concerned—that soothing beverage being forbidden her by her medical authorities—answered contentedly :

“Well, thanks, yes ! I think I will ! One really wants a cup of tea on a day like this, doesn't one ?” Mrs. Pomeroy had rarely been known to leave a statement unqualified by a question. “It is really very disagreeable weather, isn't it ? Not that it seems to trouble you at all.” Mrs. Pomeroy smiled one of her slow, amiable smiles as she spoke. “I am so glad to see you looking so much better !”

Mrs. Romaine laughed.

“I am very well indeed, thanks,” she said. “But I've not been ill that I know of, dear Mrs. Pomeroy.”

Mrs. Pomeroy shook her head gently.

“I thought, do you know, when I first came home, that you looked as though your holiday had been a little too much for you—so many people's holiday is a little too much for them, don't you think ? And how is your boy ? Very hard at work, we hear.”

Mrs. Romaine smiled.

Mrs. Pomeroy's opinion as to her looks had been quite correct ; and it was only within the last fortnight that they had altered for the better. Within that fortnight her brightness and vivacity had ceased to be—as they had been for weeks before—wholly artificial ; something of the look of nervous strain had gone out of her eyes, and her face was altogether less sharpened. Her smile now was genuine ; and her voice was strangely tender and contented.

“Very hard,” she said. “I have had to get used to a great deal of absence on his part. He has gone down to Brighton to-day, until Monday ; he needs a little fresh air, of course. It is so long since he has been shut up as he is now.”



"You must miss him very much," said Mrs. Pomeroy placidly.

Mrs. Romaine did not answer directly, except with a laugh.

"I am almost inclined to envy mothers with daughters," she said, smiling at Miss Pomeroy again. "I wonder, now"—a sudden idea had apparently struck Mrs. Romaine—"I wonder whether you would lend me your daughter now and then, and I wonder whether she would consent to be lent."

"I should be delighted," said Mrs. Pomeroy, with vague amiability, and an equally vague glance at her daughter. "And I'm sure Maud will be delighted, too, won't you, Maud?"

"Delighted!" assented Maud, with pretty promptitude.

"Well, then, we must arrange it some time or other," declared Mrs. Romaine gaily. "Perhaps you would come and spend a week with me, Maud—that would be charming!"

But she did not press the point, letting the subject drop with apparent carelessness, and talking about other things, always keeping the girl in the conversation; turning to her now and then with a pleasant, familiar word, or a gesture which was lightly affectionate. The mother and daughter had risen to take leave when she said carelessly:

"Oh, by-the-bye, Maud, dear, have you anything to do to-morrow afternoon? I've been bothered into taking two tickets for a *matinée*, a charity affair, you know, but they say it will be rather good. It would be so nice of you to come with me!"

"It will be very nice of you to take me!" was the response.

"Thank you very much!"

A minute or two more passed in the arrangement of the place and hour for meeting, and then Mrs. Pomeroy drifted blandly out of the room, followed by her daughter, and Mrs. Romaine was again alone.

She walked to the fireplace this time, and putting one foot on the fender, stood looking down, her face intent and satisfied.

"Just the right sort of girl!" she said to herself. "Just the right sort of girl!"

She was wearing the little gold bangle which Julian had given her on her birthday—the one which Miss Pomeroy had helped him to choose—and she was turning it on her wrist

with tender, contemplative touches. She was so absorbed in her reflection that she did not hear the servant come into the room, or notice for the moment that the girl was standing beside her with a letter. She started at last, and looked up; took the letter, and opened it carelessly, without looking at it, as the woman took away the tea-table.

"DEAR COUSIN HERMIA,

"Unless I hear from you to the contrary, I propose to call on you to-morrow (Saturday), at three o'clock, on a matter of grave importance.

"Faithfully yours,

"DENNIS FALCONER."

Mrs. Romaine's face had changed slightly as she began to read—changed and hardened—and as she finished she drew the letter through her fingers with a gesture of mere impatience, which was somehow belied by the look in her eyes. Something of that strained look had come back into them. She could not see him to-morrow, she was saying to herself briefly; she was not going to put off Maud Pomeroy; Dennis Falconer must fix another time, and she would write him a line at once. She walked quickly across to her writing-table, sat down, drew out a sheet of paper, and took up a pen.

And then she paused.

Ten minutes later her note was written, and on its way to the post, but it was not directed to Dennis Falconer. It began, "My dear Maud," and it told Miss Pomeroy that business had "turned up" which would make it impossible for Mrs. Romaine to go to the theatre on the following afternoon, and that she enclosed the tickets hoping that Maud might be able to use them.

Exactly on the stroke of three on the following afternoon the door-bell rang. Mrs. Romaine was alone in the drawing-room, apparently lazily and pleasantly enough occupied with the latest number of the latest society paper; and as the sound reached her ear her lips hardened into a thin, straight line, and her eyes flashed for a moment with a look of antagonism which was almost defiant. Then the servant announced:

"Mr. Falconer!"

Dennis Falconer was looking very pale; there was little colour even in his lips, and his face was set and stern. He

took the hand Mrs. Romaine held out to him, and replied to her greeting in the briefest possible phrase, with no softening of a something curiously solemn and inexorable about his demeanour, though his eyes rested on her for an instant with a singular expression. He disliked and despised the woman before him, and yet at that moment he pitied her.

"Sit down!" she said. "I am charmed to see you, though, do you know, you have chosen an inopportune moment. I had a very pleasant engagement for this afternoon, and I nearly put you off. So I hope the business is really very grave."

Her voice was lightness itself, and that very lightness, with the almost unusual loquacity with which she had received him, seemed to witness to the presence in her mind of a recollection which she was determined to ignore—the recollection of their last interview, in that very room. There was an air about her of having entrenched herself behind a barrier which she defied him to pass; of being resolute this time against surprise, or against any other method of attack.

"It is very grave!" said Falconer, and in contrast with her voice, his rang with stern heaviness. "I must ask you to prepare yourself for bad news!"

"Bad news!" she echoed sharply, as her eyes, fixed on his face, grew suddenly bright and keen. "Oh—money, I suppose?" Her voice jarred a little, though she spoke very lightly.

"No!" said Falconer.

His tone was absolutely uncompromising. On his unsympathetic and unimaginative mind the effect of her manner was to obliterate his sense of pity beneath a consciousness of the retributive justice of the moment before her.

"Not money?" she said, with a little, unreal laugh. "Well, that's a comfort, at any rate." Her hand had clenched itself suddenly round the arm of her chair on his monosyllable, and now she paused a moment, almost as though her breath had failed her, before she said, with affected carelessness: "And if not—what?"

Her back was towards the light, and Falconer could not see her face.

"I will answer your question, if you will allow me, with another," he said. "Have you noticed anything unusual in the course of the past month—or more—in the conduct of your son?"

In the instant's dead silence that followed a slight creaking sound made itself audible and then died away. The clenched hand on the bar of Mrs. Romaine's chair had passed slowly round it with such intense pressure as to produce the sound. Then she answered him, as he had previously answered her, in a monosyllable.

"No!" she said. There was a desperate effort in her voice at carelessness, at nonchalance, at astonishment; but it was penetrated through and through with all her past antagonism towards, and defiance of, the man before her accentuated into fierce repudiation. Falconer's voice, as he answered her, seemed to confront that defiance with inexorable fate.

"That is almost unfortunate," he said sternly. "In that case, I fear that what I have to tell you must fall with double and treble severity, as coming upon you unawares. Will you not think again? Has he not been absent from home a good deal? Have his absences been satisfactorily accounted for? Have you ever proved"—he paused, laying stress upon the last word—"have you ever proved such accounts, as given by himself, correct?"

With a valiant effort, the power of which Falconer must have appreciated had he been able to penetrate beyond the ghastly artificiality of the result, Mrs. Romaine rallied her forces, and strove to throw his words back upon him; to defend and entrench herself once and for all with the only weapon she knew. She broke into a thin, tuneless laugh.

"What an absolutely gruesome catechism!" she cried. "Really, it would take me weeks of solitary confinement and meditation among the tombs—isn't there a book about that, by-the-bye?—before I could approach it in a duly sepulchral spirit. Do you know, it would be an absolute relief to me if you could come to the point? I am taking it for granted, you see, that there is a point, which is no doubt a compliment which its infinitesimal nature hardly deserves. Produce the poor little thing, for heaven's sake!"

"The point is this," said Falconer grimly and concisely. "Your son's life, as you know it, is a lie. He has a sordid version of what is known as an 'establishment.' He is living with a work-girl in Camden Town."

There was a choked, strangled sound, and Mrs. Romaine's figure seemed to shrink together as though every muscle had contracted in one simultaneous throb. Her face, could Fal-

coner have seen it, was rigid and blank, except for her eyes. For that first instant she looked as a patient might look who, having suspected himself of a deadly disease, having congratulated himself on the subsidence of his symptoms and known hope, learns from his physician that that subsidence of obvious symptoms was in itself only a more dangerous symptom still, and that he is indeed doomed. Her eyes were the eyes of a woman who looks despair full in the face.

But with no human being who keeps hold of life and reason can the vivid agony of such a vision endure for more than an instant. It dulls by reason of its very insupportableness. Time is an empty word where mental suffering is concerned, and the second-hand of the tall clock in the corner had traversed its dial only once before a kind of film passed over those agonised eyes, and Mrs. Romaine spoke in a thin, hoarse voice. And the man so close to her was conscious of nothing but a short pause, and was revolted accordingly.

"How do you know?" Even in that moment the instinct of defiance of him personally could not wholly yield, and lingered in her voice.

"I have an old servant who lives in Camden Town. He is an invalid, and I occasionally visit him. His wife is a garrulous woman, and thinking that I have some claim on her gratitude, considers it necessary to inform me as to all her own and her neighbours' affairs. Visiting the husband last Friday week, I found the wife greatly excited and alarmed for the reputation of the street—in which she lets lodgings—by the appearance in the house opposite of a couple whose relations to one another had instantly been suspected by their landlady and her neighbours, though they passed as newly-made man and wife!"

With a sudden, low cry of inexpressible horror and dismay Mrs. Romaine sprang to her feet, flinging out her hands as though to keep off something intolerable to be borne.

"No! no!" she cried breathlessly. "No! no! Not that! Not married? It would be ruin! Ruin! ruin! No! no!"

Dennis Falconer paused, freezing slowly into what seemed to him surely justifiable abhorrence of the woman before him. What if he knew in his heart that such a marriage would indeed mean ruin to a young man? So bald a trampling down of the moral aspect of the position before the practical

was not decent! It was for a woman—and that woman the young man's mother—to be overwhelmed by the moral horror to the exclusion of every other thought! And it was the practical alone that had drawn any show of emotion from Mrs. Romaine!

"I am sorry to have agitated you!" he said, and his voice was cold and cutting as steel. "I have no doubt in my own mind that they are not married. I had better perhaps continue to give you the facts in order. Chance led to my seeing the young man in question as he was leaving the house. I recognised your son. I proceeded to make enquiries. He passes as a medical student, under the name of Roden. The girl is—or was—a hand at one of the big millinery establishments. From her affectation of innocence and simplicity, the woman who has most opportunity of observing her is inclined to think the very worst of her!"

A quick, hissing breath—an unmistakeable breath of relief—parted Mrs. Romaine's white lips. She had sunk down again in her chair and was grasping it now with both hands as she leant a little forward, trembling in every limb.

"Then it is not likely—it is not likely that he has married her," she said, in a low, rapid tone to herself rather than to Falconer, as it seemed. "Go on!"

"There is very little more to be said," returned Falconer icily. "They have occupied the rooms—that is to say, the girl has occupied them, visited every day by your son—for three weeks now. The woman has discovered that they had been somewhere in the country together for a week previously. You will, of course, be able to recall his absence from home. Yesterday he took her away into the country again; they are to return on Monday!"

He stopped; and as though she were no longer conscious of his presence, Mrs. Romaine's head was bowed slowly lower, as if under some irresistible weight, until her forehead rested on her hand, stretched out still upon the arm of her wide chair.

She lifted her face at last, white and haggard as twenty added years of life should not have made it, and rose, helping herself feebly with the arm of her chair, like a woman whose physical strength is broken. Falconer rose also. He was utterly alienated from her; he was conscious of only the most distant pity, but he felt that it was incumbent on him to say something.

"I regret very much that it should have fallen to my lot to break this to you!" he said, stiffly and awkwardly. "I fear that coming from me——" He hesitated and paused.

From out the past, confusing, almost numbing him, a vague and ghastly influence had risen suddenly upon him to strain that strange, intangible, and awful cord of common knowledge by which he and the woman before him were bound together, revolt against it or deny its presence as they might. Under the touch of that influence his last words had come from him almost involuntarily. He had not known whither they tended; he could bring them to no conclusion.

Mrs. Romaine looked him in the eyes, holding now to a table by which she stood, but with no weakness in her ashen face. She seemed to be concentrating all her force into one final repudiation of him. She ignored his words as though he had not spoken.

"I will ask you to leave me now!" she said. And her voice, thin and toneless though it was, left her completely mistress of the situation.

She made no movement to shake hands; he hesitated a moment, then bowed and left the room.

## CHAPTER XX

"It's a jolly little place enough!"

"I think it's lovely."

There was a certain tone of regret, of lingering, reluctant farewell, in both voices; though in Julian's case it was light and patronising; in Clemence's, dreamy and tender. As Julian spoke he shifted his position slightly as he leant against the iron railing by which they stood, and let his eyes wander over the scene before them with condescending approval.

They were standing on the somewhat embryonic "sea-front" of what a few years before had been a fishing village, and was now struggling, rather inefficiently, to become a watering-place. Such season as the place could boast was entirely confined to the summer months; to the frequenters of winter resorts it was absolutely unknown; consequently its intrinsic charms at the moment—in all the lassitude and monotony left by departed glory—might have been considered conspicuous by their absence. But it was a glorious winter's day. A slight sprinkling of snow had been frozen on the roofs of the somewhat depressed-looking houses and on the unsightliness of the unfinished sea-front; and brilliant sunshine, almost warm in spite of the keen, frosty air, was glorifying alike the deserted little town, the country beyond, and the sparkling, dancing sea. The frosty, invigorating brightness found a responsive chord in Julian's heart this morning; he was not always so susceptible to such simple, natural influences. He was in a good humour with the place; he had spent two wholly satisfactory days there—two days, moreover, which had had much the same influence upon his moral tone as a change to bracing air and simple, wholesome food would have on a physique accustomed to dissipation.

His survey ended finally with Clemence's face. She was standing at his side looking out over the sea, her eyes intent and full of feeling, her beautiful face flushed and still, absorbed by the mysterious charm of the ceaseless movement and trouble of the bright water stretching away before her.

"What are you looking at, Clemence?" he said boyishly.



She lifted her eyes to his quite gravely and simply.

"Only the sea," she said. "It is so beautiful, I feel as if I never could leave off looking at it. It makes me feel—oh, I can't tell you, but it is like something great and strong to take away with one!" She looked away again. "Oh, I wish, I wish we need not go!" she said with a little sigh.

"I wish we needn't," returned Julian; he had been dimly conscious of something in her eyes and voice which made her previous words, simple as they seemed, almost unintelligible to him, and he caught at her last sentence as containing an idea to which he could respond. "It's an awful nuisance, isn't it? And do you know it is time we started? Never mind. We'll come down again soon!"

They stood for another moment; Clemence looking out at the sunny sea, Julian taking another careless comprehensive view of the whole scene; and then, as though those last looks had contained their respective farewells, they turned with one accord and walked away in the direction of the railway station. And as if in turning her back upon the sunlit sea she had turned her back also upon something less definite and tangible, a certain gravity and wistfulness crept gradually over Clemence's face as they went; crept over it to settle down into a sadness most unusual to it as the train carried them quickly away towards London. Julian, sitting opposite her, was vaguely struck by her expression.

"Are you awfully sorry to go back, Clemence?" he said.

She started slightly, and looked at him with a faint smile.

"I suppose I am!" she said. "We have been very happy, haven't we?" There was a wistful regret in her voice which touched him somehow, and he answered her demonstratively, with a cheery and enthusiastic augury for the future. Clemence smiled again; again rather faintly. "I know!" she said. "I mean I hope so. Only—I don't know what's the matter with me! I feel as if—something were finished!"

Julian broke into a boyish laugh. Her depression was by no means displeasing to him; and the necessity for "cheering her up" implied the exercise of that superiority and authority in which he delighted.

"Why, what a dear little goose you are, Clemence!" he said, leaning forward to take her hands in his. "A 'Friday to Monday' can't last for ever, you know, but it can be repeated again and again. Why, I shall be up every day—every single

day, I promise you. I shouldn't wonder if I found I could spend the evening with you to-morrow! Won't that console you?"

She did not answer him, but she took one of his hands in hers and pressed it to her cheek. His consolation had hardly touched that strange oppression which weighed upon her; and Julian, in high feather, and quite unaware that only his voice was heard by her, his words passing her by unheeded, had been talking at great length about all the happiness before them, when she said, in a hesitating, far-away voice:

"Could you—could you come home with me this afternoon?"

Julian paused a moment. The question was hardly the response his words had demanded. Then he said decisively:

"Quite impossible, I am sorry to say. I would if I could, you know, dear, but it's quite impossible!"

She gave his hand a little quick pressure.

"I know, of course!" she murmured gently. She paused a moment, and then said in a low voice, rather irrelevantly as it seemed: "Julian"—his name still came rather hesitatingly from her lips—"do you think—do you like Mrs. Jackson?"

Mrs. Jackson was the name of the woman whose rooms Julian had taken for her, and he started slightly at the question.

"She's not a bad sort," he said, with rather startled consideration. "At least, she seems all right. Isn't she nice to you, Clemence? Don't you like the rooms?"

"Oh, yes! yes!" she said quickly, almost as though she reproached herself for saying anything that could suggest to him even a shadow of discontent on her part. "I like them so very, very much. It is only—I don't know what exactly. Somehow, I don't think Mrs. Jackson is quite a nice woman." She had spoken the last words hesitatingly and with difficulty, almost as though they came from her against her will.

Julian glanced at her quickly.

"What makes you think that, Clemence?" he said, with judicial masterfulness. "Have you any reason, I mean?"

But Clemence was hardly able to define, even in her own pure mind, what it was that jarred upon her in her landlady's manner; and to Julian she was utterly unable to put her feelings into words. Her hasty disclaimer and her hesitating beginning and falterings, however, served to remove the mis-giving which had stirred him lest some knowledge of his own

real life should have come to the woman's knowledge. He was the readier to let himself be reassured and to dismiss the subject in that the train was slackening speed for the last time before reaching London, and he intended to move into a first-class smoking carriage at the approaching station. Julian was well aware of the risks of discovery involved in these journeys with Clemence; and though he faced them nonchalantly enough, he used wits with which no one who knew him only in his capacities of man about town and budding barrister would have credited him, to reduce them to a minimum. To be seen emerging from a third-class carriage at Victoria Station was a wholly unnecessary risk to run, and he avoided it accordingly.

"You mustn't be fanciful, Clemmie," he said, now in a lordly and airy fashion. "I've no doubt Mrs. Jackson is a very jolly woman, as a matter of fact. Look here, dear, would you mind if I went and had a smoke now? It isn't much further, you know, and one mustn't smoke in hospital, you see!"

Clemence was very pale when he joined her on the platform at Victoria—joined her after a quick glance round to see whether he must prepare himself for an encounter with an acquaintance; and she did not speak, only looked up at him with a grave, steady smile which made her face sadder than before. His announcement of his intention of putting her into a hansom drew from her an absolutely horrified protest. She would go in an omnibus, she told him hurriedly, or in the Underground! She had never been in a cab! It would cost so much! But when he overruled her, a little impatiently—it was not yet dark, and he did not wish to remain longer than was necessary with her in Victoria Station—she submitted timidly, with a sudden slight flushing of her cheeks.

"A four-wheeler, Julian!" she murmured pleadingly, as they emerged into the station yard. With a lofty smile at what he supposed to be nervousness on her part, he signified assent with a little condescending gesture, and stopped before a waiting cab.

"Here you are," he said. "Jump in!"

She got in obediently, and as he shut the door she turned to him through the open window.

"Good-bye, Julian!" she said, in a low, sweet voice.

"Good-bye!" he said cheerily, smiling at her. Her face in its dingy frame looked whiter, sweeter, and more steadfast

than ever, and it made a curiously sudden and distinct impression on Julian's mental retina. Then the cab turned lumberingly round, and he moved smartly away. He did not see that as the cab turned, that sweet, white face appeared at the other window and followed him with wide, wistful eyes until the moving life of London parted them.

Julian was on his way to the club. He had a vague disinclination to the thought of going home; the house in Chelsea was always more or less distasteful to him now, and he had no intention of going thither before it was necessary. It was nearly dark by the time his destination was reached, and as his hansom drew up a few yards from the club entrance he could only see that the way was stopped by a carriage from which two ladies and a gentleman had just emerged. It was the younger of the two ladies who glanced in his direction, and said, in a pretty, uninterested voice:

"Isn't that Mr. Romaine?"

Marston Loring was the man addressed, and he shot a keen, considering glance at the speaker—Miss Pomeroy. The fact that her eyes had noticed Julian when his quick ones had not, trivial as it was, was not without its significance to the man whose stock-in-trade, so to speak, was founded on clever estimate and appreciation of trifles. Was Miss Pomeroy not so entirely unobservant a nonentity as she was supposed to be, he asked himself, not for the first time; or was there another reason for her quickness in this instance?

"So it is!" he said. "Hullo, old fellow!"

Julian came eagerly up to the group as it paused for him on the club steps, and shook hands in his pleasantest manner with Mrs. Pomeroy.

"I do believe it's a ladies' afternoon!" he exclaimed gaily. "What luck for me! How do you do?" shaking hands with Miss Pomeroy. "I'd actually forgotten all about it, and I've only just come up from Brighton! Loring, you must ask me to join your party, old man! Tell him so, Miss Pomeroy, please!"

Whether strict veracity is to be imputed to a young man who professes unbounded satisfaction at finding fashionable "ladies' teas" in full swing at his club when he has just come off a journey is perhaps doubtful; but Julian threw himself into the spirit of the moment with a frank gaiety and enthusiasm which was not to be surpassed. The greater number of the ladies who were sipping club tea as if it were a hitherto

untasted nectar, and gazing at club furniture as though it were provision for the comfort of some strange animal, were acquaintances of his ; and as he moved about among them his passage seemed to be marked by merrier laughs, a quicker fire of the jokes of the moment, and brighter faces than prevailed elsewhere. He was enjoying himself so thoroughly, apparently, that he was unable to tear himself away, and when he left the club at last, he sprang into a hansom, and told the driver to "put the horse along." He and his mother were dining out together, and he had left himself barely sufficient time to dress.

He ran up the steps, flinging the driver his fare, let himself in with his latch-key, and proceeded to his room up two steps at a time. When he emerged thence, twenty minutes later, in evening dress, he was congratulating himself on having "done the trick capitally, and well up to time."

He was a little surprised, therefore, as he came downstairs, to find his mother's maid waiting for him outside the drawing-room door with the information that Mrs. Romaine was already in the carriage ; and he ran hastily downstairs, put on his overcoat, and proceeded to join her.

"I'm awfully sorry, dear," he said, with eager apology. "I thought it was earlier. The fact is, I was awfully late getting in. I found 'ladies' teas' going on at the club—so awfully stupid of me to forget—you might have liked to go—and it was rather good fun. How are you, dear?"

He had let himself into the brougham as he spoke, had shut the door, and seated himself by the figure he could only dimly see sitting rather back in the corner so that little or no light fell on the face. He had kissed his mother, hardly stemming the flood of his eloquence for the purpose ; and he now hardly waited for her word or two of reply before he plunged once more into eager, amusing talk. He did not give his mother time to do more than answer monosyllabically, and it followed that her silence did not strike him. He sprang out, when the carriage stopped, to give her his hand, but before he had given his instructions to the coachman, and followed her into the house, she had disappeared into the ladies' cloak-room. Consequently it was not until she came to him as he waited to follow her into the drawing-room that he really saw her. As his eyes rested on the figure coming towards him, he suddenly saw, not it, but a sweet, white face with wistful eyes looking at him from out of a dingy frame.

## CHAPTER XXI

ALWAYS excellently dressed, Mrs. Romaine's appearance at that moment was brilliant; almost excessively brilliant it seemed for a small dinner-party. Her frock was of the most pronounced type of full-dress, and she wore diamonds; not many, but so disposed, as was her reddish-brown hair, as to make the greatest possible effect. But the detail which had caught her son's experienced eye, and which had brought before him by some unaccountable law of contrast that other woman's face, lay in the fact that to-night for the first time his mother was slightly "made up." The colour on her cheeks, the bright effectiveness of her eyes, was the result of art. It made her look haggard, Julian decided with careless, indifferent distaste; and then he was following her into the room.

She had hardly paused to speak to him; apparently she imagined that they were late.

They were widely separated at dinner, and were not thrown together, as it happened, during the whole evening. But Mrs. Romaine's personality was a factor in the party not to be ignored that night; she was delightful, everybody said. It was a very select little dinner, and society romps went on afterwards; romps to which Mrs. Romaine contributed her full share. And to Julian that newly acquired sense of his mother's artificiality was accentuated as the evening passed on into something like repugnance; a repugnance which, when he was seated with her at last in the brougham and driving home, produced in him a strong disinclination to rouse himself to an assumption of vivacity, and made him occupy himself with his own thoughts so exclusively that he never noticed that his mother uttered not a single word.

"Good night, mother!" he said absently, as they stood together in the hall. He was stooping to kiss her when she stopped him with a slight, peremptory gesture.

"I want to speak to you!" she said. Her voice was tense and a little hoarse. Without another word, without so much

as glancing at him, she passed him and led the way to his smoking-room ; turned up the lamp with a quick, hard gesture, and then turned and faced him.

All the colour had faded from Julian's face, and he had followed her slowly. With the first sound of her voice the conviction had come to him that he was discovered. There were certain weaknesses in him hitherto undeveloped by the circumstances of his life, but radical factors in his character. Morally speaking he was a coward. His hour had come, and he was afraid to meet it. He came just inside the door and stood leaning against the writing-table, confronting his mother, but neither looking at her nor speaking.

"Tell me where you have been since Friday !" she said, low and peremptorily ; and then she stopped herself abruptly, putting out her hand as though to prevent him from speaking, as a spasm of pain distorted her face. "No !" she said in a hoarse, breathless way. "No, don't ! You'll tell me a lie. Don't ! I know !"

She had put out her hand and was steadying herself by the high oak mantelpiece—part of her recent present to Julian—but her face was rigid and set, and her eyes, full of a strange, indefinable agony, which she seemed to be all the while holding desperately at bay, never left the pale, downcast, almost sullen face opposite her.

With a determined wrench and setting in motion of all his faculties, Julian pulled himself together so far as to take refuge in that sure resort of the deficient in moral courage—an assumption of jaunty and light-hearted non-comprehension. Perhaps he had never in his life been more like his mother than he was at that moment as he threw back his head and answered, with an affected gaiety which was somewhat hollow and unsuccessful :

"What do you know, dear ? You're coming it rather strong, aren't you ?"

"I know that you have been living with a common work-girl somewhere in Camden Town for a month or more !"

The words were spoken in the same hoarse voice which rang now, low as it was, with an intolerable disgust. But its expression seemed to affect Julian not at all. The words themselves were occupying all his perception. A quick frown of consideration appeared on his forehead, as though some relief or reprieve had come to him, bringing with it possibilities

the skilful turning to account of which called into play his mental faculties, and in so doing strung up his nerve. He dropped his artificiality of manner, and seemed to brace himself to meet the emergency in which he found himself. The situation had evidently suddenly altered its character for him. He was no longer cowed by it.

There was a pause—a pause in which Mrs. Romaine's eyes seemed to dilate and contract, and dilate again under the suffering to which she allowed expression in neither tone nor gesture; and then there came from Julian four awkward, hardly audible words, jerked out rather than spoken, with long pauses intervening:

"How do you know?"

A short, sharp breath came from Mrs. Romaine, and then she said, with cold decisiveness, though it seemed that nothing would take that hoarseness from her voice:

"It matters very little how I know. That I know by one chance; that some one else may know by another; some one else again by another—the details in each case, when the chances are innumerable, are nothing! Have you lived all this time in London not to know that discovery is inevitable—to wonder 'how' when it comes?"

There was a bitterness, a keenness of scorn in her voice which stung him like a lash, and he answered hotly:

"After all, mother, we are not living in Arcadia! We don't talk about these things, and I'm awfully sorry, I'm sure, that this should have come to your knowledge; I'm awfully sorry to offend you. But, hang it all, I'm not worse than lots of fellows about!"

His tone had gathered confidence and defiance as he went on, and it seemed to shake her a little. Her hold on the mantelpiece tightened, and she spoke quickly and rather nervously.

"It's very likely," she said. "I don't want to argue the principle with you. Young men have their own ideas, I know; but how many young men—drop out? How many young men, with good positions, good chances, somehow or other get into bad odour; get to be not received—or, if they are received, it is with certain reservations—through this kind of thing? Oh, of course I don't say it's inevitable. There are lots of men about, as you say. But it's an awful risk. In the case of a young man like you, with no title to the



position you hold in society but <sup>your</sup>—your personality, don't you see, it is a double and treble risk. It is playing with edged tools; it is holding a knife to your own throat. You would go under so horribly easily."

She paused abruptly, as though the image before her eyes were too terrible to her to be pursued further, and tried to moisten her dry lips, on which the touch of paint had cracked now, showing how white they were beneath. The ghastliness of the incongruity between her manner and the superficialities of which she spoke was indescribable. Julian did not speak; he was moving one foot to and fro slowly over the carpet, at which he gazed immovably, and his mother went on almost immediately.

"You must give it up, Julian," she said incisively. "I will do anything that is necessary in the way of money; I don't want to be hard upon you. Anything the girl wants you shall have; but you must break with her at once."

She paused again, but still Julian did not speak; still he did not raise his eyes. She went on with a growing insistence in her voice which went hand in hand with a growing agony of appeal:

"If you don't see the necessity now, you must believe me when I tell you that you will—you will. Look, dear! your life is surely not so dull that you need run after such distraction as that! You shall marry if you want to. You shall marry any one you like. But you must—you must give this up. Julian——" She stopped for a moment, and her voice grew thin, almost faint, as she pressed so heavily on the carving by which she held that her hand was bruised and blackened. "Julian, I am not telling you what it has been to me to know that you have deceived me. I am not going to try and make you feel—I don't want you to feel it, dear—what it has been to me to go over your home-life of the last few weeks and know that you have lied to me at every turn—to me, who have only wanted to make you happy. I won't reproach you. Perhaps young men think it a kind of right—a kind of right——" She repeated the sentence, unfinished as it was, as though it contained an idea to which she clung. "It is not for my sake—to spare my feelings, that I tell you you must give it up. It is for your own. Julian, my boy, you must believe me."

Her words, quivering with entreaty, died away; her eyes,

full of supplication, were fixed on his; and Julian spoke—spoke without lifting his eyes from the ground.

"Suppose I married her?" he said in a low, shamefaced voice.

"What!" The monosyllable rang out sharp and vibrating, and Mrs. Romaine, all softness or relaxation struck from her face and figure in one sudden bracing of every muscle, stood staring at him out of eyes alive with horror.

"Suppose—I married—her!"

"Supposing that—I will tell you! You would have to keep her and yourself! You would have no more of my money, and you would never be acknowledged in my house again!" Her low voice was like fine, cold steel, and she paused. Then quite suddenly, as though the horror kept at bay in her eyes had leapt up and mastered her in an instant, she flung out her hands wildly, crying: "Julian, Julian! You are not married? Tell me, tell me you are not married?"

And Julian, white to the very lips, said low and hurriedly:

"No!"

There was a long silence. With a choked, hysterical cry, Mrs. Romaine dropped into a chair near her, and covered her face with her hands. Julian drew out his pocket-handkerchief and mechanically wiped his forehead. At last he began, in a nervous, uneven voice:

"Mother, look here, I—you don't quite understand me! I—she—it's—it's not the kind of girl you think!" He stopped and drew his hand desperately before his eyes. That innocent, white face, in its dingy frame, what did it want before his eyes now? How could he get on if he kept looking at it? "She—we—it was my fault! Mother, look here, I ought!"

Mrs. Romaine took her hands away from her face and clenched them together.

"You shall not," she said in a low, steady voice.

"She—she—was an awfully good girl, don't you know. She's not—of course she's not one of our sort, but—she would learn. Mother, after all, why not? Nothing else can—can make it right!"

"Nothing else can ruin you completely!" was the steady answer. "You shall never do it if I can prevent it. I have told you what I would do; think it well over. Think what it would mean to you to have not one farthing but what you can earn! To be cut by every one who knows you! To be

without a chance of any kind ! I told you that if you married I would disown you ! Now I tell you something else ! Break off this miserable connection and you shall have, as I said, anything in reason to give the girl in compensation once and for all. Refuse to do so and I will cut off your allowance until you come to your senses !”

“Mother !” he cried fiercely. “By Heaven, mother !”

“You can take your choice !” was the unmoved answer.

Her face was sharp and haggard ; the artificial colour stood out on it in great patches, throwing into relief the vivid pallor beneath. She had thrown aside her cloak as though the physical oppression was unbearable to her, and the contrast between her face and her gorgeous dress with its glittering ornaments was horrible.

A smothered oath broke from the young man, and lifting his right hand, he began to rub it slowly up and down the back of his head as an expression of heavy, fierce cogitation settled down upon his face. To his unutterable surprise, as he made the gesture, there stole over his mother’s face an expression of such deadly terror as he had never before seen. He stopped involuntarily, and she staggered to her feet, holding out two quivering, imploring hands. For the first time in his life Julian was using a gesture habitual in his dead father ; for the first time in his life, looking into her son’s face, Mrs. Romaine saw there the face of William Romaine.

“My boy !” she gasped. “My boy. Don’t do that ! Don’t look like that, for Heaven’s sake ! For Heaven’s sake !”

She swayed for a moment to and fro, and then fell heavily forward into his arms.

## CHAPTER XXII

A BITTER east wind, which was taking sufficiently depressing effect upon all London, was dealing with peculiar grimness with Redburn Street, Camden Town. The neat little houses in that dreary grey dryness looked sordidly wretched; there was something deserted and hopeless about them. No one was to be seen, except that at a first-floor window about half-way down a woman's figure was standing, and as Dennis Falconer turned into the street his footsteps rang with heavy distinctness on the glaring pavement. He strode slowly and steadily along, and his solitary figure, as it stood out with that peculiar sharpness of outline which is a characteristic production of east wind, harmonised absolutely with the sombreness of the background. His face was full of sombre purpose, grave and stern.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon of Wednesday—two days after Julian's return home. On the morning of the preceding day Julian and his mother had had a second interview, which had ended in his giving a sullen and reluctant assent to her demands; and in the evening Dennis Falconer had received from Mrs. Romaine a brief, almost peremptory note, begging him to come to her. He had gone to Queen Anne Street accordingly, severely unsympathetic, but also severely reliable, early on Wednesday morning.

He had found Mrs. Romaine in a feverish agony of agitation beyond even the power of her will to conceal or wholly to control. Her voice, painfully thin and sharp; her gestures restless, nervous, irritable; her utterance hard and rapid; had all testified to a strained, tense excitement before which all her artificiality was utterly submerged, and in which Falconer himself was obviously regarded by her solely as the one instrument at hand to her necessity. Her whole soul seemed to be set upon the immediate termination of "the affair," as she called it. It affected her evidently in only one way, she looked at it from only one point of view: as something to be finished up, put away, buried out of sight. It was

the thought of delay in the doing of this, only, that appeared to torture her ; of the affair itself with all its terrible significance, its inevitable consequences, she had, as far as Falconer could divine, no adequate conception. The girl must be bought off ; must be sent away ; must be sent right out of the country, in case—and here came the one agonised sense of a possible consequence which Falconer could detect—in case Julian should marry her after all !

It was evidently the haunting terror of such a contingency which had driven her to send for Falconer. It was obvious, though she seemed to be striving hard to conceal it even from herself, that she could not trust her son ; that she could find no rest in the promise she had wrung from him. What she had to say to Falconer was, in effect, that some one else must see the girl ; the arrangement to be surely effected must be brought about by a third person who would set about the business promptly and act decidedly. It was this service which she wanted of Falconer, and Falconer, after a moment's grave self-communing, agreed to render it. He was as far removed from sympathy with her in this her hard, agonised reality as he had been from the artificial woman of the previous months, or from the real woman of eighteen years before. He considered her point of view in the present instance absolutely revolting in her. But no man could question the practical sense of what she said, or the advisability of the course she proposed, and his conception of his obligations as her sole male relative and trustee was too intimately intertwined with his sense of duty and self-respect to allow him to entertain, even for a moment, the possibility of refusing to act for her. He had stood by her side, impelled by that sense of duty, gravely reliable, and unsympathetic, eighteen years before. The irony of fate decreed that it was for him, and for him only, to act for her now. To him it was simply the stern dictate of moral necessity to be obeyed as such.

Accordingly he had received her instructions, offering now and again a grim, practical suggestion, with a stern air of businesslike reserve ; had undertaken—being at the bottom of her opinion as to the desirability of instant measures—to see “the girl” that same afternoon ; and he was walking down Redburn Street now, in the pitiless east wind, to carry that undertaking into effect.

He reached the house, knocked, and asked briefly for Mrs.

Roden. The landlady, whose sentiments towards her lodgers had developed rapidly in consequence of the enquiries which Falconer had felt it his duty to make, received his words with a sniff expressive of contempt ; and then informed him, with a stare of insolent curiosity, that "she" was "hupstairs," and led the way thither ; evidently urged to that act of civility solely by a hope of finding out something. She was a coarse, vulgar-looking woman, with small red eyes, which glittered expectantly as she flung the door open and announced, in a loud and denunciatory voice, "'Ere's a gentleman !"

But if she had hoped for startling revelations she was disappointed. Dennis Falconer advanced into the room with stern composure ; the figure in the window turned quickly but quietly to meet him ; and Mrs. Jackson was obliged to shut the door upon the two.

Clemence was looking very pale. The vague shadow which had fallen upon her as she journeyed up to London two days before had deepened into a wistful, questioning sadness. She had not seen Julian since she parted from him at Victoria Station. On the previous day she had received a note from him which told her that "work" kept him from her for that day, but that he would come as soon as he was able. There was nothing to distress or alarm her in the fact itself ; more than once before a similar disappointment had come to her ; and even though the second day brought her no letter, the blank merely meant, as she assured herself hour by hour, that she would see him before the day was done. But strive against it as she might, and did, she had spent the past twenty-four hours weighed down by a sense of trouble utterly undefined ; utterly, as it seemed to her, without reason. She had borne her burden with mute patience, reproaching herself as for ingratitude and an inordinate desire for active happiness, and struggling bravely to conquer it ; but neither arguing about it nor denying it, as a less simple and straightforward nature would have done. And now the appearance of Falconer seemed suddenly to focus and define her vague distress. The sudden conviction that Julian was ill, and that this gentleman had come from him to tell her so, held her still and silent in a pang of cruel realisation and anticipation.

The light, as she moved, had fallen full upon her face, and as he saw it a certain shock passed through Dennis Falconer. He had seen her figure, and even her face in the distance

more than once, but he had never before seen it with any distinctness, and for the first instant the simplicity and purity of its beauty, with the expression deepened by the strange shadow through which the past two days had led her, clashed almost painfully with that idea of "the girl" which had grown, during his conversation with Mrs. Romaine, into a kind of fact for him. The next moment, however, he had reconciled appearances and realities, as he conceived them, with the grim reflection that there is no vice so vicious as that which wears an innocent face; and in doing so had quenched what might have been perception beneath a weight of narrow truism.

No greeting of any kind passed between them. All Clemence's faculties were absorbed in her dread. Falconer was busied with the process of reconciliation. The strange little silence was broken eventually by Falconer, and he spoke with the unbending sternness and distance which that process and its conclusion had naturally accentuated.

"I am here as the representative of Julian Roden's nearest relative and guardian," he said. It had been arranged between himself and Mrs. Romaine, on the suggestion of the latter, that "the girl," if she did not already know it, should be kept in ignorance of Julian's real name.

The statement was slightly over-coloured, since Julian was of age, and his mother was no longer his guardian in any legal sense; but to stern moralists of Falconer's type, to whom the pretty little falsenesses of life are wholly to be condemned, a slight misstatement in such a case is frequently permissible. The brief, uncompromising words had seemed to him to set the key of the interview beyond mistake. He was consequently slightly taken aback by their effect.

Every trace of colour died out of Clemence's face, and two great dilated eyes gazed at him for an instant in dumb agony before she whispered:

"He's not—dead?"

Falconer made a slight, almost contemptuous, negative gesture. He had no intention of being imposed upon by theatrical arts, and as Clemence, her self-control shattered by the sudden relief, turned instinctively away, and pressed her face down on the arm with which she had caught at the curtain for support, he went on with immovable sternness:

"My business has to do with his life, not his death. The main point is very simple, and I will put it to you at once

Absolute ruin lies before him. Is he or is he not to embrace it?"

He saw her start, and she lifted her face quickly, and turned it to him all quivering and unstrung from her recent suffering, and quite white.

"He is in trouble!" she cried, low and breathlessly. "Oh, what is it? What has happened?"

Dennis Falconer's patience was approaching its limits, and he spoke curtly and conclusively.

"I think we may dispense with this kind of thing," he said. "It can serve no purpose, as everything is known. I come now from his mother with full power to act for her——"

He was interrupted. A burning colour, the colour of such paralysing surprise as can take in hardly the bare statement, much less the consequent developements and inferences, had rushed suddenly over Clemence's face, dyeing her very throat.

"His mother!" she exclaimed. "His mother!" Her tone dropped as she repeated the words into a strange, uncertain murmur, in which incredulity, acceptance—as a kind of experiment—and something that was almost fear, were inextricably blended.

The fear alone caught Falconer's ear. His lips were parted to resume his speech with grim decisiveness in the conviction that she understood at last that nothing was to be gained by trifling with him, when she said, as though he had had nothing to do with her previous words:

"Go on, please."

He looked at her again, and was struck by a new look in her face, as he had been struck by a new tone in her voice. She was evidently going to drop all theatricalities, he told himself.

"Perhaps you were not aware that he is, practically, under the control of his mother," he said. "That is to say, he is dependent on her for every penny he spends. It is quite out of the question that he should make money at the bar—by his own profession, that is to say—for two or three years at least. Consequently the cutting off of the allowance made him by Mrs.—Roden will mean for him absolute penury."

She was staring at him; staring at him out of two wide, intense brown eyes; with such a helpless bewilderment in her face that she seemed to be quite dazed. She put her hand to



her head as he paused with a feeble, uncertain gesture ; but she did not speak, and Falconer went on severely :

"I conclude that he has not represented these facts to you as they stand. They are facts, nevertheless. You will, therefore, understand that, his allowance withdrawn, he will be entirely without the means of supporting you. You may possibly consider that some shifty means might be found which, by putting him in possession of small sums of money, would enable him for a time to defy his mother. Let me point out to you something of what such a course would involve. Julian Roden is a young man with a good position in society—I mean he is accustomed to be made much of by men and women who are his equals ; he has chances and opportunities of which he intends, no doubt, to avail himself. All this, in taking such a step, he would throw away for ever. Social intercourse, future career, would go with his income at his mother's word. Now, I will ask you only how long you could hope to depend on him in such circumstances ; how long it would be before his only feeling for the woman whom he had allowed to drag him down and to destroy all his hopes in life would degenerate into sheer repugnance ; and for how long he would care to keep her ?"

He paused, and after a moment's dead silence Clemence spoke in a weak, eager, almost desperate voice :

"There must be some mistake ! It—it can't be—the same !"

The words seemed to Falconer a mere miserable subterfuge, and he answered very sternly :

"There is not the faintest possibility of mistake. Julian Roden has owned the whole affair to his mother, who taxed him with it on her discovery——"

"Oh, wait a minute ! Wait a minute !"

There was a ring of such intolerable pain, such shame and anguish, in the voice, that Falconer's attention, heavy and prejudiced as it was, was arrested by it. Dimly and uncertainly, and for the first time, the girl before him appeared to him, not simply as a representative of a degraded sisterhood, but as a woman. He looked at her for a moment, as she stood with her face buried in her hands, quivering from head to foot, with a severe kind of pity.

"I will tell you, as briefly as may be, what I am charged to say," he said gravely, but not ungently. "Mrs.—Roden is

determined to break off her son's disgraceful connection with you at the cost of any suffering to herself or to him. She is willing to believe that her son is to be considered in some sort as the more guilty party of the two in having acted as the tempter, and she has no wish to deal otherwise than generously by you. But there are conditions."

He paused again. Over the slender, bowed woman's figure before him there had gradually crept, as he spoke, a stillness like the stillness of death; and now, as he waited for her to speak, Clemence slowly lifted her head and looked at him; looked at him with dull, sunken eyes, which seemed the only living points in a face out of which all life and expression seemed to have been crushed by a rigid, haggard mask.

"Conditions?" she repeated.

Her voice was hollow, and had a monotonous, far-away sound, and the word seemed to have no meaning for her.

A sense of vague discomfort took possession of Dennis Falconer. A dim sense that he was not being met as he had expected—as he had a right to expect—disturbed and annoyed him. He had no idea that what he was chiefly discomposed by was a hazy consciousness that a touch of unconscionable respect for the woman who, as he believed, was utterly unworthy of respect, was mingling with his already sufficiently unorthodox sense of pity; but he entrenched himself in a triple armour of stiffness.

"The conditions are these," he said. "You will give your written word, as under penalties for having obtained money by false pretences, to leave England on a given date and by a given route, and not to return to England within the next ten years. Mrs.—Roden in return will pay you the sum of five hundred pounds. If you refuse these terms, and Roden submits to his mother, you will simply be the poorer by five hundred pounds. If you induce him to defy his mother, the consequences I have already described to you will inevitably ensue."

He waited for her answer, steadily fortifying himself against being surprised at anything she might say; but no answer came. That strange, stricken face was still turned full towards him, but he had an uneasy sense that he was not seen by the great, dull, dark eyes. He felt, too, that as she stood there with her hands tightly clasped together, she was not thinking even remotely of the choice he had set before her, though he

knew that she had heard his words and understood them. It was with an instinctive desire to rouse her, to bring back some expression to her face, that he said, with an awkward gentleness which was quite involuntary :

"There is no need for you to decide hastily. You understand the alternative thoroughly, no doubt. I will leave you my address, and you can write me your answer."

He felt in his pocket for his card-case, and the movement seemed to rouse her. She stopped him with a slight motion of her hand.

"There's no need," she said. As though the act of speaking had brought her back from somewhere far away, and as though the claims of the moment were gradually becoming present to her, she paused as if to gather force, and to close upon herself a certain strangely fine reserve, which seemed at once to hedge her about and hold her aloof from the man to whom she spoke ; and then she spoke very quietly. "I don't want any money. If it is better that he should be free of me, he shall be free. That's all."

"You are making a mistake !" returned Falconer quickly. There was something about the dignity of her manner which made him feel curiously impotent and small, as though in the presence of an unknown power greater than himself, and the sense increased the touch of irritation he had already experienced. His tone was no longer coldly stern ; it was insistent and annoyed. "You should consider your future. If you accept Mrs. Roden's offer and leave England with a small capital you will have a chance of beginning life again. The step you have lately taken may be your first step on the downward path—I conclude that it is. You should reflect how difficult it is to pause there. With a little money you may establish yourself in a respectable business, and in the course of time you may even redeem your unfortunate past."

Not a muscle of the still, pale face moved. It seemed to have grown strangely older and stronger in the course of the short interview, and it listened to him with an air of courteous patience which seemed to set an impassable distance between them. The perfect steadiness of her voice as she replied was the steadiness not of composure but of reserve.

"It is quite impossible !" she said.

"Then I am sorry to have to say that I consider you both foolish and ungrateful !" said Falconer with increasing severity.

"You put it entirely out of our power to do anything for you. Am I to understand that you refuse to leave England?"

"I don't know. I must think!" Still the same distant, unmoved patience.

"You will do well to think," was Falconer's reply, "and to put away from you in doing so a false pride, which is entirely misplaced. I will give you twenty-four hours for consideration, and to-morrow afternoon I will call and see you again." On second thoughts it had occurred to Falconer that it would be a false step to give her his name and address. "I shall hope to find that you have come to a sensible decision."

He paused a moment, and she made a slight gesture of acquiescence, rather as though his words were indifferent to her than in any token of assent to what he said. He added a stiff, formal "Good afternoon!" and as her lips moved mechanically as if to frame the words in answer, he turned and left the room.

As though his presence and his words had been so mere a drop in the deep waters of suffering which held her that his withdrawal affected her not at all, Clemence stood for the moment just as he left her, hardly conscious, as it seemed, that he was gone. Then, as though the sense that she was alone had come to her gradually, she dropped feebly into a chair, and let her face fall heavily forward upon the table.

## CHAPTER XXIII

THE hand crept round the clock, the swift November twilight fell, and still she did not move; only her clasped hands stretched themselves out as if in prayer. She was not praying, though. The attitude was instinctive and unconscious; a blind, mute appeal. She was simply stunned. The room grew darker and darker until its only light was a ray from the street-lamp outside falling straight across the bowed head; and then there was a ring at the bell and a slow step upon the stairs. Clemence knew the step well, though she had never before heard it fall like that. As it fell upon her ear now, a strong shiver ran all through her, and her hands were drawn sharply to cover her face. The door was opened, and her face was pressed down still more tightly.

"Clemence! What, all in the dark? Why, Clemence ——" The masterful, rather aggressively cheerful young voice stopped abruptly, and Julian Romaine stood still against the door he had closed behind him, listening; listening to a low, pitiful sound, which seemed to fill the very air—the sound of a woman's heart-broken crying. At the first tone of his voice great, scalding tears had started to Clemence's eyes suddenly and without warning; a low, choking sob had shaken her from head to foot, and she was crying now with the hopeless abandonment of suddenly loosened grief.

There was a moment during which the only sound in the room was the sound of her quivering sobs. Julian stood quite still; on the first instant there leapt into his face such a look of fierce, vindictive anger as absolutely transformed it. The look faded slowly into a kind of bitter background, and a hard sullenness settled itself upon it—settled with some difficulty as it seemed, for his lips twitched a little. Then he advanced into the room and broke the silence, and the roughness in his tone seemed to defy something within himself. He made no attempt to light the gas. The lamp outside made it possible to move about, and apparently he did not care for further illumination.

"Come, Clemence," he said, "what's the matter?"

He had not approached her; on the contrary, he was on the other side of the room looking down at her across the lodging-house table. She did not raise her head or move as she replied; indeed, the choked, broken words were rather the expression of the mingled shame and pity with which she was crushed than a definite answer to his words.

"Oh! Julian! Julian! Julian!"

Apparently the tone of her voice affected him in spite of himself, for his face twitched again, and he spoke more harshly still.

"What's the matter, I say?"

She stretched her hands out to him across the table, still without lifting her face, in an unconscious gesture of appeal.

"Oh, don't!" she cried beseechingly and piteously.

"Don't, dear! Don't pretend any more. I—I know!"

The hands thrust deep down into Julian's pockets were clenched fiercely, and his teeth were set together, as a look rose in his eyes which they had never held before.

"My mother?" he said.

She answered only with a slight shivering gesture, but it was enough. With his young face white to the lips with passionate resentment, Julian turned brusquely away and took two blind strides to the window, with a muttered oath.

There was a long silence. Julian stood at the window, staring blankly out into the darkness with hard eyes. Clemence was indeed, as she believed herself to be, his wife. How it had come about, how he had drifted into anything so far from his vague thoughts in his first meetings with her, he could not have said. What it was that had shaped and moulded his intention into something so much purer and more manly than his own nature, he only now and then felt faintly and indefinitely when he touched it, as he could touch it rarely and densely, in the woman from whose higher nature it emanated. He had married her with that reckless carelessness for the future which seems almost abnormal, but which is not an uncommon characteristic of weakness; and now he was quite incapable of facing and enduring the legitimate consequences of his action. He had lied to his mother to save himself from the heavier penalty with which she threatened him, and his suggestion as to the possibility of his marrying the girl she believed him to have ruined, had been a miserable,

consciously degraded attempt at cutting the Gordian knot. He had lied to his mother again, deliberately and without compunction, at their second interview, giving her a promise which he knew to be an empty form, in his word to break with the girl who was his wife. He had come to Clemence to-day, intending to arrange for that temporary suspension of intercourse with her, which was inevitable as a blind to his mother, by telling her that he was obliged to go abroad immediately for an indefinite period.

Now as he stood there in the dark little room, with his eyes fixed on the solitary gas-lamp outside, he was gradually realising that it was all over. His mother had sent, had possibly come herself, to Clemence, he supposed, and Clemence had, of course, declared herself his wife. His plans were all upset. His carefully made calculations were no longer of any avail. It was all over. His brain gradually ceased to busy itself; he was staring darkly at penury, humiliation, ostracism—not thinking of them or feeling them, but just contemplating them with a stupid, mental gaze.

Gradually a sense of his surroundings began to return to him. He became conscious that it was a street-lamp at which he was looking; that there was a dark little street before him; that there was a dim room behind him; and then from that room a low sound came to him—faint, exhausted, long-drawn sobs, as of a woman who has wept herself into quiet. He began to listen for them and count them involuntarily. Then they began to hurt him; each one seemed to stick something into his heart. At last he walked across almost mechanically, and laid his hand tentatively on her shoulder.

"It's all right, Clemence!" he said huskily. "It's all right, dear. After all, you know, you are my wife all right!" He was conscious of a vague idea that it was the supposition he had allowed that had cut her so cruelly.

There was another moment's pause, and then Clemence slowly lifted her head and looked at him for the first time. Her face was white and exhausted-looking with her tears, and her eyes, luminous and inexpressibly mournful, seemed to look through the pale, good-looking young features above her into the poor cramped soul they hid.

"I?" she said. "What does it matter about me, Julian? It's you! Oh, my dear, my dear, it's you!"

"It—it's awkward!" returned Julian gloomily; his con-

sciousness of the prospect before him seemed to quicken and writhe at what he supposed to be her realisation of it. "It's loss of everything practically, of course. One will be cut right and left, and where money is to come from——"

He was interrupted by a low cry. Clemence had drawn a little back as though to see him better, and was looking up at him with her delicate eyebrows drawn together in intense, painful perplexity and wonder.

"Oh, Julian!" she said, and her low voice had for the first time a ring of reproach in it. "Oh, Julian, it isn't that, dear! It isn't that! What does that matter?"

"What does it matter?" echoed Julian with an angry laugh. Her words, in the total want of comprehension, the total incapacity for sympathy with his position, to which they witnessed, seemed to him to throw into sudden, glaring relief the class distinction which lay between them; and the sense of it came upon him, jarring and overwhelming, like an earnest of all he had done for himself. "It matters a good deal, let me tell you, Clemence. It matters—as you can't understand, you know! It matters just everything!"

"But—compared!" she said in a low, quick tone, a bright, pained light in her eyes. "I know—I know, of course, that there is a great deal I can't understand. But—compared!"

"Compared with what, in Heaven's name?" said Julian angrily.

"Compared with—yourself, Julian!" she cried, laying a tender, clinging touch on his arm. "Compared with your own truth! Oh, don't you know it's that, it's only that that has been so dreadful to me—that made me feel as if my heart was breaking! It's thinking that you've been false, dear! That you've said what's not true, acted what's not true! Oh, it's that that I can't bear for you, my dear, my dear!"

He stood looking down, not at her face, but at the worn, trembling hand holding his in such a clasp of love and shame—shame for him as he vaguely felt; suspended between wrath and a certain cold, creeping feeling which he could not analyse, but which seemed to be gradually turning him into a horrible shadow. It was an involuntary, unwilling concession to this feeling, as one might throw a sop to an on-coming, all-threatening monster, that he muttered awkwardly:

"I—I'm sorry I deceived you, Clemence."

"Deceived me!" There was an emphasis on the pronoun



which seemed to lift her far above him in its absolute, unconscious self-abnegation. "Me! Oh, it isn't that! It doesn't matter who it is or how many people it is! It's the thing itself. It's the meaning to yourself, and—Heaven above! Julian, dear, you believe in Heaven above, don't you?" Clemence's creed was very simple; the attitude of the spirit which "Heaven above" had given her was not an affair of many words. "You know it's oneself that matters. It isn't what one has or the friends one has that make the difference—they're not anything really. It's oneself!"

She paused a moment, but he did not speak. He was still looking heavily down at the hand on his arm, and she went on again, her voice trembling with earnestness.

"Julian, there's that at the bottom of everything in all kinds of life! It doesn't matter whether one's rich or poor, it doesn't matter whether people think well of us—we can't always make them, and we can't all be rich. But we can all be good, dear. Heaven means us all to be good, don't you think? Oh, if it didn't, if it wasn't that that mattered most of all down at the bottom, what would the world come to be like? And why should anybody go on living?"

Julian Romaine was very young. Far down in his nature; in that awful inextricable tangle which, because it is so awful and so far beyond his reach, man struggles so insanely to reduce to his poor little level, to define, and label, and explain away, but which remains in spite of him a mystery of God; there was that strange affinity for noble thoughts and things which is the sign manual of His part in man, never wholly withdrawn by its Creator from the earth. It is in the young that that instinctive affinity is most easily reached and touched; and the simple, ignorant, unworldly words—words which could have touched in Julian no reasoning powers—were the medium which reached it now. Clemence had reached it more than once or twice before, and its feeble stirring in response had quickened it, and rendered it, in some poor and infinitesimal degree, sensitive to her touch.

He drew his arm sharply from those clinging, pleading hands, and turned away, leaning his arm on the mantelpiece so that she could not see his face. That cold, creeping feeling which seemed to sap all his reality had stolen over his whole personality, and he was held numb and paralysed in the clutch of an all-dominating question. Was it really as she said? His

own life, his own world had faded into shadows as of a very dream. Strange, distorted shapes, conceptions so new to him that they wore a weird and ghostly air of unreality, seemed to be rising round him, pressing him into nothingness. Was it as she said? He did not speak, and after a moment Clemence went on; very tenderly, very delicately, as though in her intense sympathy and feeling for the suffering she ascribed to him by intuition, she dreaded to hurt him further; diffidently and with difficulty, because she was so little used to clothing in words all that to her was most real and vital in life.

"You—you must think of the future, dear. I know—I know that you can hardly bear to look at the past, but it—it is past! It hasn't been you, really! I know it can't have been! And—it will wear out of your life at last, dear, by—by truth. You will tell your mother that we are married"—a scarlet, agonising colour dyed her face for an instant—"perhaps you have told her already? And perhaps, perhaps she will forgive you! If not—why, if not, perhaps the—the pain will help to wear it out, my dearest."

Her voice and the expression of the sweet, white face she lifted to him had changed subtly as she spoke. Her great pity and sorrow for him had developed a strange, new phase in her love for him. It had become tenderer, deeper. She had lost her reverence for him, but her love had triumphed over the loss, and through the pain and victory it had won higher ground, and become the love of sympathy and consolation.

But Julian hardly heard her last words. His attention had stopped, as it were, at those preceding them:

"You will tell your mother that we are married!"

Had Clemence not told, then? Was it possible that she had not mentioned it; that his mother did not know even now; that there was still hope?

The thought arrested the current of his thoughts in an instant. The possibilities the thought suggested; all the tangible, definite advantages it held; swept over those faintly quickened perceptions in a sudden wave of excitement, numbing them on the instant. The things which had been realities to him as long as he had had any consciousness, took to themselves substance once again and pressed about him. Life and the world resumed their normal complexion, and he lifted his head quickly and turned.

"Do you mean—have you seen my mother? Whom have you seen? Do you mean that you have said nothing?"

There was a pause as Clemence looked at him for a moment confused and startled, it seemed, by his manner. There was a wonderful, unconscious touch of dignity in her gentle manner as she answered.

"I never thought of it!"

"Was it my mother?"

"No; a gentleman."

Julian moved abruptly with a low exclamation, and began to walk rapidly up and down the little room absorbed in eager thought. Clemence watched him with a puzzled, surprised look in her eyes, and a little touch of reserve creeping over her face. At last he stopped suddenly and began to speak, looking anywhere but on her face.

"Look here, Clemence, I'm afraid this sounds an awfully blackguardly thing to suggest, but you'll see it's necessary. It won't do for me to tell my mother just yet. To tell you the truth she is frightfully set against my marrying. I am done for all round as soon as she knows, and it would be just cutting our own throats to tell her—yet, you know. You see," he went on hurriedly, evidently anxious to prevent her speaking. "you see, as I am I've got very good prospects. In a few years, if all goes well, I shall be making heaps of money at the bar—a fellow that is well known, you know, can always get on—and then it will be all right and simple. Meanwhile, you see, I have plenty of money, and we can be together almost as much as we like, quietly, you know. Whereas if we burst it all up now we shall just starve and be out of it all our lives. Don't you see?"

He stopped awkwardly, but for the moment he had no answer. Clemence had listened to him, the expression of her face changing from wonder to incredulity, from incredulity to agony, from agony to the look of a creature stricken to death. She lifted her hand in the silence slowly and heavily to her head. Julian saw the gesture, though he could not see her face, and its heaviness somehow increased his discomfort.

"You see it's only common sense!" he said impatiently.

"You mean that you want to go on living a double life—that you don't want, don't mean to try, to do right!" The voice was not like the voice of the Clemence he knew. It was low, distinct, and stern, and she spoke very slowly.

"I mean that I don't want to ruin myself out of hand!" he said harshly. "Don't be foolish, Clemence!"

"Ruin!" she said in the same tone. "You don't know what real ruin means! I don't know how to make you understand; I'm not clever enough. But I can tell you just this! I would rather die than have it as you say. For your sake, not for my own only, I would rather die. Until your mother knows the truth I won't even see you or speak to you again. As to taking a penny of your money, I would starve first."

Her tone, vibrating with intensity of meaning, was quite low. She was not declaiming or protesting. She was simply making her stand at a proposition so terrible to her that it had carried her beyond the bounds of emotion. For the moment Julian was startled and aghast.

"You don't mean that!" he said. "Clemence, that's nonsense!"

"It's truth!" she said steadily. "You must choose!"

She was standing facing him, her slight figure erect and straight as he had never seen it. Her face was white as death, and set into strange, fine lines quite new to it; all the softness about her mouth was being gradually pressed out as the latent strength developed, as it seemed, with every breath she drew. It was as though the crisis, in its sudden demand upon her forces, was transforming her as she grappled with it; transforming her into a woman before whom Julian felt himself shrink into utter contemptibility. He took the only means he knew to reassert himself, and lost his temper deliberately.

"Well, then, I do choose!" he cried violently. "You're a foolish girl, who doesn't understand, Clemence, and by-and-by you'll own I was right! As to not taking my money, that's absurd, you know! You must! But I'm not going to ruin both of us for absurd fancies!"

He stopped, hoping she would answer and give him some advantage, but she stood silent, gazing at him with stern, searching eyes, as though she were trying in vain to reconcile the man before her with the man she loved. Julian felt her gaze though he could not see it, and he went on hotly, trying, as it were, to gather round him the rags of his old authority and superiority.

"You don't suppose, Clemence," he said, "that I propose this because I like it? It's not a nice thing for a man to propose to his wife, I can tell you. I should have hoped you would have understood that. But after all it's only for a time, and it won't make any real difference to you—things will be just as

they have been. And if you can't feel about it as I do, you must remember it's because you've got a great deal to learn still, and you must believe that what I say is right. Anyway, you're my wife, you know, and you're bound to obey me!"

"I'm bound to obey you in all things that it's right you should ask. But I'm not bound to do what would be dragging you down and me too. I can't make you do what's right; it wouldn't do you any good for me to tell your mother; but until you do, it will be as I said."

"Then it's you who part us," he cried passionately. "You don't love me, Clemence! You can't ever have loved me!"

There was a moment's pause, and then her answer came in a strange, still voice.

"I do love you!" she said. "I love you so that I would give my life to blot out what you've said!"

A dead silence—a silence in which Julian Romaine seemed to feel something pulling and straining at his heart-strings. Then with a reckless, desperate effort he tore himself away from its influence and spoke.

"It can't be helped, then," he said fiercely and defiantly. "You must go your own way until you come to your senses! Some day, perhaps, you'll be grateful to me for refusing to make fools of us! I wouldn't have believed it of you, Clemence! You make me almost sorry that I ever saw you. Now, look here; I've put it to you from every point of view; I've tried as hard as ever I can to make you understand, and if you won't, you won't! As to the money, of course, I can't hear of your not taking that. I shall send you so much regularly every month—it won't be very much either, but it'll be enough to keep you—and, of course, you'll have to spend it. But you need not be afraid that I shall want to see you again until you come to a more sensible frame of mind."

He waited, but again there was no answer, and again some influence from her still presence discomfited him, and made him hurry on.

"I'm going now!" he said roughly. "Good-bye, Clemence!" He made a movement as though to go, without a tenderer farewell, but quite suddenly his heart failed him. He turned again and took her into his arms impulsively and tenderly. "Clemmie!" he said brokenly. "I say—Clemmie!"

Her arms were round his neck pressing him closely and more closely, with a desperate, agonised pressure, and a long, clinging kiss was on his cheek.

"Don't keep me waiting long," she whispered hoarsely. "You will do it at last. I know, I know you will. But—don't keep me waiting long!"

She released him and drew herself gently out of his arms, and Julian turned and stumbled out of the room and down the stairs, the most consciously contemptible young man in London, and with no strength to act upon his consciousness.

## CHAPTER XXIV

"You admire it, Mrs. Romaine? It strikes you as true? Ah, but that is very charming of you!"

A confused babel of voices—that curious, indefinable sound which is shrill, though its shrillness would be most difficult to trace; harsh, though it arises from the voices of well-bred men and women; and absolutely unmeaning—was filling the two rooms from end to end; and the soft light diffused by cleverly arranged lamps fell upon groups of smartly dressed women and men equally correct in their attire on male lines. It was about five o'clock, not a pleasant time on a gusty, sleety November afternoon if Nature is allowed to have her own way; but inside these rooms it was impossible to do anything but ignore Nature; the air was so soft and warm—faintly scented, too, with flowers—and the colour so rich and delicate. The rooms themselves were a curious hybrid between the fashionable and the artistic; that is to say, they were not arranged according to any conventional tenets, and there were various really beautiful hangings, "bits" of old brass, "bits" of old oak, and "bits" of old china about. But all these, though very cleverly arranged, were distinctly "posed." The larger of the two rooms was obviously a studio; rather too obviously, perhaps, since the fact was impressed by a certain superabundance of artistic prettinesses. Charming little arrangements in hangings, palms, or what not, "composed" at every turn with the constantly shifting groups. The unconventionalism, in short, was as carefully arranged as was the attitude of the host of the hour as he stood leaning against a large easel, mysteriously curtained, talking to Mrs. Romaine. He was a painter, and a clever painter; he had married a clever wife, and as a result of the working of their respective brains towards the same goal he had become the fashion. "Everybody" went to "the Stormont-Eades' affairs," whether the affair in question was a little dinner, a little "evening," or a little tea-party—Mrs. Stormont-Eade always affixed the diminutive; consequently everybody was obliged to go; a fact which if carefully thought out, will

read to some rather curious conclusions. And the little tea-parties, particularly in the winter, were considered particularly desirable functions. One of these tea-parties was going on now.

Mr. Stormont-Eade himself was a tall, good-looking man who had nearly succeeded, by dint of careful attention to his good points, in conveying the impression that he was a handsome man. He had fine eyes, really remarkably fine, as he was well aware, when they were earnest, and they were looking now with a deep intensity of meaning, which was their normal expression, into Mrs. Romaine's face; his mouth was not so admirable except when he smiled, and consequently his thin lips were slightly curved; his figure was too thin, and the touch of picturesqueness about his pose and about his velvet coat redeemed it; but his closely-curling hair was cut short and trim, and showed the excellent shape of his head to the best advantage. He had come up to Mrs. Romaine only a minute or two before at the conclusion of a song; a very little very fashionable music was always a feature of the Stormont-Eades' entertainments, and "good people"—the phrase in this connection representing clever professionals possessed of the social ambition of the day—were glad to sing or play for them; and she had begun to speak of a little picture of his which was one of the themes of the moment.

Mrs. Romaine was dressed from head to foot in carefully harmonised shades of green—green was the colour of the season—with a good deal of soft black fur about it. Her bonnet became her to perfection; her face was so animated that in the soft light a certain haggard sharpness of contour was hardly perceptible. Her smiles and laughs as she exchanged greetings and chat were always ready; if they left her eyes quite untouched, her attention was apparently as free and disengaged as were the gay little gestures with which she emphasized her talk. There was absolutely nothing about her which could have suggested to the ordinary observer anything beyond the surface of finished society woman which she was presenting so brightly to the world. But on the previous evening she had had a note from Falconer, written immediately after his interview with "the girl," telling her only that he was to have a second interview, and would see her on the following day. That day was now drawing to a close, and she had as yet heard nothing further.



"It enchanted me!" she said now. "But then your things always do enchant me, you know! By-the-bye, people say that you are going to do a big picture. I hope that is not so? Little bits are so much more fascinating."

Mr. Stormont-Eade smiled — the tender, comprehending smile that was one of his charms.

"No, it is not true," he said. "One is so fettered with a large work, but little things represent the inspiration, the feeling of the moment. If they have any value, it lies in that." They had a distinct financial value, though it is doubtful whether the dealers would have recognised the source.

"Ah, the feeling of the moment!" said Mrs. Romaine with pretty fervour. "That is what one so seldom gets, isn't it? And it is so delightful!"

Then she broke off with a charming smile to shake hands with Mrs. Halse, brought by the constant shifting of the groups into her vicinity. Mrs. Romaine was an excellent listener, and reputed a good talker, though she had probably never said a witty or a clever thing in her life; but she was never exclusive; she was always, so to speak, more or less in touch with the whole room, and ready to extend her circle.

"I've been making for you for hours," she said gaily. "Ah!" The word was an exclamation of pleased surprise as she suddenly became aware of a girl's figure behind Mrs. Halse; a girl's figure much better dressed than had been its wont, and very erect, with a latent touch of triumph and excitement on the pretty face. It was Miss Hilda Newton.

"I did not know you were in London," went on Mrs. Romaine, holding out her hand with gracious cordiality.

"She is staying with me on most important business," said Mrs. Halse. Mrs. Halse had accommodated herself to her increasing portliness by this time, and had apparently thought it necessary to increase the exuberance of her manner proportionately. Her voice, and the laugh with which she spoke, were equally loud. "Trousseau, you must know. She is to be married directly after Christmas. And when I heard it I wrote and said she'd better come straight to me, and then I could see that she got the right things. Of course, as she's to live in town, she must have the right things, you know."

"Of course," assented Mrs. Romaine gaily and airily. "And you are very busy?"

The last words were addressed to Hilda Newton, whose

hand Mrs. Romaine still held. There was a curious mixture of resentment, defiance, and triumph in the girl's face as she confronted the suave, smiling countenance of the elder woman, which just touched her voice as she answered :

"Very busy indeed !"

She was conscious of a desire so to frame her answer as to suggest the position in society which was to be hers on her marriage, but she could think of no words in which to do it.

"And where is Master Julian?" broke in Mrs. Halse. Delicacy and tact had never been more than names with her ; as her fibre, mental and physical, coarsened, she was beginning to think it quite unnecessary to maintain even a bowing acquaintance with these qualities ; and her strident voice expressed a great deal that Hilda Newton would like to have expressed. "He must be made to come and offer his congratulations—or perhaps Hilda will compound with him for a particularly handsome wedding-present. He knows Talbot Compton, of course ? Otherwise, they must be introduced."

"He is not here this afternoon, I'm sorry to say," returned his mother, smiling. Mr. Stormont-Eade, if he could have recognised "the feeling of the moment" in this particular crisis, might have learnt a lesson on several points. "He has turned into a tremendously hard worker, you know. An astonishing fact, isn't it ? I tell him he has secret intentions of taking the bench by storm."

She was laughing and looking idly away across the room, when quite suddenly she stopped. Just inside the doorway, shaking hands with Mrs. Stormont-Eade, and having evidently just arrived, was Dennis Falconer, and as she caught sight of him there flashed into her eyes, through all the superficial brightness of her face, something which was like nothing but a sheer agony of hunger. It came in an instant, and it was gone in an instant. As he turned away from his hostess and caught her eye, she made him a light gesture and smile of greeting, and turned again to Mrs. Halse ; and Mrs. Halse was not even conscious of a pause.

"It's almost too astonishing, don't you know!" said that vociferous lady with a laugh. "I don't half believe in these sudden transformations. If I were you I should make him produce his work every night for inspection. It's my belief he is getting into mischief. These hard-working young men are such frauds !"

She laughed loudly, and at that moment accident brought Falconer, on his way across the room, to a standstill a few paces from her. He had evidently intended to pass the little group, but Mrs. Halse frustrated his intention. With a peremptory gesture she claimed his attention, and as he drew nearer, she said boisterously :

"Now, don't you agree with me, Mr. Falconer? Aren't these good, hard-working boys the greatest scamps going?"

Falconer was looking very severe and impassive ; he shook hands with Mrs. Halse, and then turned perforce to Mrs. Romaine, taking her hand with an almost solemn gravity, which contrasted sharply with the careless gaiety with which she extended it.

"I didn't expect to see you this afternoon," she said lightly. "Stupid of me, though ; every one comes to the Stormont-Eades."

"I did not expect to meet you," he answered sternly. "I have called at Queen Anne Street."

He had been astounded at not finding her at home. He was distinctly of opinion that afternoon teas were not for a woman who should be sitting in sackcloth and ashes, and the sight of her had shocked not only his sense of propriety, but some deeper sense of the reality of the crisis at which he was assisting. Perhaps Mrs. Romaine understood that her presence at the "little tea-party" scandalised him, for there was a strange, bitter smile on her lips before she turned to Mrs. Halse, and said, with a rather hard, strained ring in her gay voice :

"You will get no support from my cousin, I assure you, Mrs. Halse. He was a most praiseworthy——"

Her voice was drowned in a ringing chord on the piano, and as the prelude to a song filled the room, she made a mocking gesture expressive of the impossibility of making herself heard ; and turning her face towards the singer, as she stood by Falconer's side, she composed herself to listen. Her face grew rather set and fixed in its lines of animated attention as the song went on, and when it ceased, her comments were of the indefinitely delighted order. She made them very easily and brightly, however, and then she turned carelessly to Falconer.

"Are you thinking of staying long?" she said lightly. "I rather want to talk to you, do you know—this unfortunate man

is my man of business, you must know, Mrs. Halse—and I thought perhaps that I could drive you somewhere.”

“I shall be happy to go whenever you like,” was the grave answer.

Mrs. Romaine laughed lightly.

“Oh, I don’t want to take you away immediately!” she said. “You’ve only just come, I’m afraid. In a little while!”

She smiled and nodded to him, and to Mrs. Halse and Miss Newton, and moved away to speak to some other people.

About a quarter of an hour later Falconer, who was a somewhat grim ornament to society in the interval, saw her coming smiling towards him.

“Ready?” she said. “That’s very nice of you! Suppose we go, then?”

He followed her out of the room and down the stairs, her flow of comments and laughter never ceasing; put her into her carriage, and got in himself.

“Home!” she said sharply to the coachman. The door banged, they rolled away into the darkness and the wet, and her voice stopped suddenly.

They rolled along for a few minutes in total silence. Shut up alone with her like that, the isolation and quiet following so suddenly on the crowd and noise of a moment before, Falconer’s only conscious feeling was one of almost stupid discomfort. Her sudden silence, too, had an indefinable but very unpleasant effect upon him. At last he said with awkward displeasure:

“I was going to write to you! I——”

She lifted her hand quickly and stopped him.

“When we get in!” she said in a quick, tense voice.

“You can come in? It is just six. It need not take long.”

“I am quite at your service.”

She leant back in her corner with a sharp breath of relief, and neither moved nor spoke again until the carriage drew up at her own door.

She opened the door with a latch-key, and moved quickly across the hall to the foot of the stairs, motioning to Falconer to follow her. Then she stopped abruptly and turned. A servant was just crossing the hall to the dining-room, where the preliminary preparation for a dinner-party could be seen.

“Is Mr. Julian in?” said Mrs. Romaine sharply.

"Not yet, ma'am."

"If he should come in before I go to dress, tell him that I am engaged."

She turned again and went on to the drawing-room.

"Now!" she said in a breathless peremptory monosyllable, facing Falconer as he shut the door. She did not attempt to sit down herself or to invite Falconer to do so. All her senses seemed to be absorbed in the desperate anxiety with which her face was sharp and haggard. She looked ten years older than she had looked in Mr. Stormont-Eade's studio. Falconer answered her directly with no preliminary formalities.

"I saw the—the young woman yesterday," he began; "but I was unable to bring about any arrangement. I gave her twenty-four hours for consideration, and this afternoon I called to see her again."

"Yes, yes!"

"I found that she had left the house this morning, leaving no address."

"Left!" The erect, tense figure confronting him staggered back a step as though a heavy blow had fallen upon it, and Mrs. Romaine caught desperately at the back of a chair. "Left—and you don't know where she is? You've settled nothing? We've no hold over her!"

The words had come from her in hoarse, gasping sentences, each one growing in intensity until the last vibrated with an agony of very despair, but Falconer's face grew grimmer as he listened. How it was he could not have told, but a strange, uncomfortable remembrance of the girl he had seen on the previous day, which had haunted him at more or less inopportune moments ever since, seemed to rise now and accentuate all his usual antagonism to the woman who was talking of her.

"I think you need not distress yourself," he said stiffly. "Perhaps I had better tell you at once that your son knows no more of her whereabouts than we do."

The drawn look of despair relaxed on Mrs. Romaine's face; relaxed into an agony of questioning doubt.

"Doesn't know?" she said sharply. "Julian doesn't know?"

"The landlady of the house," continued Falconer, "a very unpleasant and loquacious woman, was eager to inform me that on the arrival of your son yesterday afternoon, about an hour

after I saw the young woman, there was a quarrel between them and that he left the house in anger. To-day, very shortly before my arrival, he returned and was astonished to find that the young woman was gone. He demanded her address, and was furious to find that it was not known. I think there is no room for doubt that the young woman has left him!"

The colour was coming back to Mrs. Romaine's face slowly and in burning patches, and her clutch on the chair was almost convulsive.

"Left him!" she said under her breath. "Left him!" There was a moment's pause, and then she said in a harsh, high-pitched, concentrated tone: "Do you mean—for good? Why? Why should she?"

"I am sorry to have to say it to you," said Falconer slowly, "but I fear the case against your son is even blacker than it appears on the surface. I think it more than possible that he deceived the young woman."

The slowly-formed conviction—and it became conviction only as he spoke the words—was the result of that vague and disturbing impression made on Falconer on the preceding day by "the young woman." It had worked slowly and almost without consciousness on his part, but it had refused to die out, and it had attained the only fruition possible to it in his last words.

"And you believe that she is really gone? That there is nothing more to fear from her?"

It was the same absorbed, intent tone, and her eyes, fixed eagerly on Falconer now, were hard and glittering. The terrible significance of his words, with all the weight of tragedy they held, seemed to have passed her by, to have no existence for her. It was as though the sense in her which should have responded to it was numbed or non-existent. And Falconer, scandalised and revolted, replied sternly:

"I think you need have no anxiety on that score. She has disappeared of her own free will, and your son, upon reflection, will probably be glad to accept so easy a solution of what he doubtless recognises by this time as a troublesome complication." There was a rigid and utterly antipathetic condemnation of Julian in his voice; he had judged the young man, and sentenced him as vicious to the core, and for all his experience, he held too rigidly to his narrow conception to consider the possible effect upon youth and passion of so sudden and total

a thwarting. "My only fear," he continued, "is that serious injustice has been done. The young woman is by no means the kind of young woman I was led to believe her. I have grave doubts as to whether it was not our duty to enforce a marriage upon your son, instead of negating the suggestion."

The words were probably rather more than he would have been prepared to stand to had they been put to a practical issue, and he had spoken them, though he hardly knew it, more from a severe desire to arouse what he called in his own mind "some decent feeling" in the woman to whom he spoke, than from any other reason. From that point of view they failed completely. It was a bright light of triumph that flashed into Mrs. Romaine's eyes as she said quickly, and in an eager, vibrating tone, which seemed less an answer to him personally than to the bare fact to which he had given words:

"Fortunately there is no more fear of that."

The tall clock standing in a corner of the room chimed the three-quarters as she spoke, and she started as she heard it.

"It is a quarter to seven," she said. "And I have people to dinner. You have nothing else to tell me, have you? Nothing to advise?"

"Nothing," was the grim answer.

"You do not think—would it be a good thing, do you think, to have the girl traced so that we could always be sure?"

"You need take no further trouble in the matter, in my opinion. If you should observe anything in your son's conduct to revive your uneasiness, the question must, of course, be reconsidered. You will observe him closely, no doubt."

There was a moment's curiously dead silence, and then it was broken by a strange half-laugh.

"No doubt!" said Mrs. Romaine. "No doubt!"

Another pause, and then she turned and glanced at the clock.

"I must go," she said. "Thank you."

She held out her hand, and he just touched it as though conventionality alone compelled him.

"I have considered myself bound in duty in the matter," he said stiffly. "Good night!"

No touch of artificiality returned to her manner even in dismissing him. It remained hard and practical. Her intense absorption in the subject of their interview did not yield by so

much as a hair's breadth, and she remained absolutely impervious to any thought of the man before her. His slight, cold touch of her hand, the sternness of his obvious condemnation of her, were evidently absolutely unobserved by her.

"Good night!" she returned; and as he left her without another word, she crossed the room rapidly and went upstairs to dress for dinner.

The dinner-party of that evening was unanimously declared by the guests to be quite the most delightful Mrs. Romaine had ever given. The dinner, the flowers, all the arrangements, were perfection, of course; but even when this is the case the "go" of a dinner-party may be a variable or even a non-existent quality; and it was the "go" of this particular occasion that was so remarkable. All the component parts of the party seemed to be animated and fused into one harmonious whole by the spirits of the hostess and host. Mrs. Romaine was so charming, so bright, so full of vivacity; Julian, who put in his appearance only just before the announcement of dinner, was so boyish, so lively, so ingenuous. He was a little pale when he first appeared, and the lady he took down to dinner reproached him with working too hard; but as the evening wore on he gained colour. The relations between himself and his mother had always been quite one of the features of Mrs. Romaine's entertainments, but those relations had never been more charmingly accentuated than they were to-night.

Until he came gaily in among her guests that evening, Julian and his mother had not met since that second interview which had prompted her summons to Falconer. Julian had dined out on both the intervening evenings, and it was easily to be arranged under these circumstances, if either of the pair so willed it, that forty-eight hours should go by without their coming in contact with one another. And an onlooker aware of the circumstances of their last meeting, and watching the mother and son through the evening now, might have reflected that the laws of heredity seldom operate exclusively through one parent.

"Good night, dear Mrs. Romaine! Such a delightful evening! How I do envy you that dear boy of yours! It's the greatest pleasure to see you two together."

The speaker was a good-natured old lady, and she had thought it no harm to put into words what her fellow-guests had only thought. She was the last departure, and Mrs.



Romayne followed her to the top of the stairs, with a laughing deprecation of the words which was very fascinating, and then turned back into the drawing-room with another "good night," as Julian prepared to attend the old lady to her carriage.

The hall door shut with a bang, and then there was a moment's pause. The mother in the drawing-room above, and the son in the hall below, stood for an instant motionless. A subtle change had come over Mrs. Romayne's face the instant she found herself alone. It had sharpened slightly, and an eager, haggard anticipation was striving to express itself in her eyes, only to be resolutely veiled. But to Julian's face as he stood with his hand still resting on the hall door there came a great and sudden alteration. All the light and gaiety died out of it before a wild, fierce expression of rebellion and distaste, repressed almost instantly by a pale, sullen look of determination. He moved, and Mrs. Romayne, hearing his step, moved slightly also; he came up the stairs, and as he came he seemed to force back into his face the easy smile it had worn all the evening.

"It's been a great success, hasn't it, dear?" he said lightly as he crossed the drawing-room threshold.

"A great success!" she said in the same tone—though in her case it rang a little thin.

An instant's silence followed, and then she laid her hand airily on his arm. Her lips were white and dry with agitation, and she knew it; she wondered desperately whether her voice rang as unnaturally in Julian's ears as it did in her own, as she said with what she meant for perfect ease:

"Dear boy, let us say our final words upon that wretched business to-night and wake up clear of it to-morrow. May I be happy about you? That's all there is to be said, isn't it?"

She tried to smile, but she knew the effort was a ghastly failure, and again she wondered whether Julian saw. She need not have feared! Julian was busy with his own histrionic difficulties, and had neither sight nor hearing for her.

"You may be quite happy, little mother!" he said, and the frank tenderness of his tone and manner were only very slightly over-accentuated. "I've made up my mind to do as you wish, and I won't make such a fool of myself again!"

They were standing close together, looking each into the other's face, and he patted her hand as it lay on his arm as he

finished. Yet between them, parting them as seas of ice could not have parted them, there lay a shadow beneath which love itself survives only as the cruellest form of torture ; the shadow of the unspoken with its chill, unmoveable dead weight against which no man or woman can prevail.

The hand on Julian's arm trembled a little. The terrible presence, which is never recognised except by those to whom its chill is as the chill of death, was making itself vaguely felt about his mother's heart. She let her eyes stray from his face with a painful, tremulous movement, and her fingers tightened round his arm.

"It is all over?" she murmured in a low voice. "It is all over, really?"

As her self-command failed her his seemed to strengthen. He patted her hand again reassuringly, and said, confidently :

"Yes, dear, indeed ! I've only got to beg your pardon, and I do that with all my heart."

He stooped and kissed her tenderly, and as he did so she seemed to rally her forces with a tremendous effort. She returned his kiss with a pretty, effusive embrace, though her lips were as cold as ice.

"I grant it freely," she said. "And if I've felt obliged to be—well, shall we say rather autocratic?—for once in a way, you must forgive me, too, eh?"

But the unspoken, terrible reality as it is, was to be touched by no such ghastly travesty. Julian's laugh was only a firmer echo of his mother's gay artificiality of tone, but as she heard it her lips turned whiter still.

"That's of course," he said. "Of course."

"Then it's all settled !" she responded gaily. "We'll draw a veil over the past from to-night, and behave better in the future. Good night, dear boy !" She kissed him again, patted him lightly on the shoulder and moved away. On the threshold she stopped, turned, and blew him a kiss over her shoulder. "Forgiveness and oblivion from to-night," she said ; and there was a strange, defiant gaiety in her voice.

With another smile and a nod she went upstairs, and as she went her face grew lined and drawn, like the face of an old woman, and the defiance that had lurked in her voice stared out of her eyes, half-wild and reckless.

## CHAPTER XXV

It was a bright spring day ; one of those days on which the freshness and renewal of life which only spring knows, and for the sake of which even the cold monotony of winter is endurable, seem to be in the very air, and to radiate with the light itself. Even in London, where nature's broadest effects, only, can be felt, there was a sense of exuberance which was almost excitement. The sun shone with a brightness which seemed to shed oblivion over past darkness. The air was quickening and stirring with vague and limitless possibilities.

It is rather a notable arrangement which makes the quickening of life in one of the least natural systems in the world, London society, simultaneous with nature's great awakening. It presents a suggestion of combined travesty, patronage, and unconscious testimony to that affinity between man and nature which nothing can wholly destroy, which, if worked out with a certain amount of latitude to a fantastic imagination, will have a rather bewildering effect upon the focus of things in general. But it is nevertheless a fact that on this particular day in May very many of the impulses stirring in nature had their strangely distorted counterparts in the impulses of society. Society, like nature, had discarded its winter garments, its winter habits ; society, like nature, was restless with fresh beginnings, fresh hopes, fresh tendencies. The resemblance lay on the surface ; the contrast was farther to seek.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, and a certain section of society—a gathering, at least, very fairly representative of a certain section—was surging in a good-tempered, aimless, demoralised way in a very fashionable church in Kensington. Some of the demoralisation was due to the occasion—a smart wedding—but the gaiety and the general air of readiness to be pleased which prevailed were as certainly the outcome of the wider spirit of the hour as were the smart spring gowns and the quantities of spring flowers carried or worn by the women. The bridal party had left the church and a general exodus was in progress ; progress rendered rather slow by reason of the

difficulties attendant on the bringing together of carriages and owners, and involving a considerable crush inside the church door. In the middle of this crush, allowing himself to be pushed and drifted along towards the door, was a man who was apparently too fully occupied in casting keen, comprehensive and reconnoitring looks about him, and in returning the gestures of greeting and welcome which returned his glances on all sides, to take much heed as to the manner or direction of the movement imposed upon him by the moving crowd. It was Marston Loring, and as he finally emerged into the air he was lightly clapped on the shoulder by Lord Garstin, who, a few yards in front of him during their compressed passage out of the building, had waited for him on the pavement.

"Glad to see you back, Loring!" he said. "Heard last night of your arrival. How are you?"

"Not sorry to be back," returned Loring nonchalantly, as he shook hands. "I've come to the conclusion, though, in the course of the last half-hour, that six months is a mere nothing!"

"Are you walking round to the house?" asked Lord Garstin. "So am I. Let me have your news as we go."

Marston Loring had spent the winter at the Cape. His departure had been alluded to among his smart acquaintances as "a sudden affair" more or less indefinitely connected in their minds with that "business" of which Loring was understood to be a devotee. To Loring himself it had been by no means a sudden thing. That is to say, the necessity for it had been gradually growing up about him in his professional life much against his will, though it had reached a crisis somewhat unexpectedly. He had been absent six months, and this was, practically, his social reappearance; but looking at him as he turned into the street with Lord Garstin, it would have been difficult to believe that he had been away at all; far less that he had passed through any striking experiences of men and life. His keen, cynical, unpleasant face was entirely unaltered; his manner was perfectly calm and unmoved. If he had his observations to make on his return, if the result of those observations was rather exciting than indifferent to him, interest and emotion were still entirely outside his pose.

The talk between the two men, however, as they passed along the streets was such talk as passes when one of the two is occupied in picking up dropped threads, and the other is well

calculated, and well satisfied, to help him in the process. In his heart of hearts—if such a spot could have been reached in him—Lord Garstin would probably have confessed to little personal liking for Loring; his cordiality was the result of considerably involved workings of social politics. Just at this moment in particular, with the prestige fresh upon him of sundry smart magazine articles on Cape affairs which he had sent home from time to time, and which had been a good deal talked about, Marston Loring was distinctly a man to be noticed and encouraged.

Details connected with the wedding at which they had just assisted were naturally the first topics that presented themselves. It was Hilda Newton's wedding; she had been married with much circumstance from Mrs. Halse's house; and, before Loring left England, it had been said that she was to be married at Christmas at her own home in Yorkshire. About a month before the day fixed for the wedding, however, the aunt with whom she lived had died; the wedding had perforce been postponed, and when it became possible to consider another date, Mrs. Halse—in the absence of any near relation to the bride-elect—had taken the matter in hand.

"A very nice affair she's made of it!" commented the elder man, as he finished his explanation, interspersed with discursive items of news of all sorts appertaining to society and its doings. "A little loud, of course; that goes without saying; and, really, nowadays it's rather the thing! A pretty girl in her way, Mrs. Compton. And talking of pretty girls, Maud Pomeroy looked well. They've been at Cannes since the end of January; only just back, like yourself."

"So I heard," answered Loring indifferently. "By-the-bye, I didn't see the Romaynes. Aren't they in town? I've not had time to look any one up yet, of course, but I thought I should see Julian to-day."

Lord Garstin paused a moment before he answered.

"They were there," he said. "I saw them come in. You'll see them at the house, no doubt. The little woman's been invisible for two or three days; ill—rather bad, somebody said."

"Ill!" echoed Loring; and there was a genuine surprise in his tone which no information yet bestowed upon him had evoked. "Really!" He paused a moment, and then said, with his own peculiar smile: "And how is Julian? Does the hard-working line hold out?"

Lord Garstin smiled, more pleasantly than Loring had done, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Pretty well, I suppose," he said. "I met his chief the other night, and he was not enthusiastic. He's a nice boy, though. You're a great chum of his, aren't you, Loring?" Loring nodded. "Then let me give you a hint to have an eye to his proceedings at the club. Cards are all very well, you know, but a boy like that should be moderate. You might be able to talk to him about it. I gave his mother a hint a few weeks ago. She's a nice little woman. See what you can do, will you? I've got an idea that the foolish fellow doesn't play only at the club."

They were close to Mrs. Halse's house as Lord Garstin finished, and his last words were spoken quickly and significantly. Loring answered only by a slight movement of his eyebrows, and then they were in the hall, being swept on by a seething crowd to pay their respects to the hostess and the bride.

"Loring, old man! How are you?"

Loring and Lord Garstin had been thrown together again after offering their congratulations, and they were standing side by side. Julian Romaine was close beside them, having come up from behind through the crowd unperceived, his hand eagerly, even demonstratively, outstretched.

Thinking things over in private later on, Marston Loring thought with a cynical smile that if he had not previously realised his six months' absence, he might have done so when young Romaine's voice fell on his ear. The change in it, though subtle, was so marked—to the man who had not heard it in course of transition—that it seemed to place years rather than months between their last meeting and the present, and it amply prepared Loring for what he saw when he turned round.

All alteration in manner and appearance consists rather in the accentuation or modification of original characteristics than in the developement of fresh ones; consequently it is very seldom noticed by a casual observer when intercourse is unbroken. To Lord Garstin and to dozens of his other acquaintances, Julian Romaine was still a "nice boy," just as his good-looking features were still the young features of a year ago. To Loring the difference in face was as perceptible as was the difference in the young man's whole personality, and the key-note of the difference lay in the absence of genuineness

in both ; in the deliberate assumption in the present of what had been natural and uncalculated in the past. Julian's face had grown thinner and harder, and the boyish smile which was in consequence no longer perfectly harmonious was a trifle over-accentuated ; while the bright, ingenuous glance of his eyes had grown extraordinarily like his mother. His manner was the gay, young manner which had gained him so many friends, with just that touch of exaggeration added to it which artificiality gives.

His cordiality as he wrung Loring's hand was rather—like the demonstrative welcome in his voice—admirably adjusted to meet the requirements of the moment than an expression of the man himself. He was very carefully dressed, with a particularly dainty flower in his buttonhole.

"Back again at last, old fellow!" he said buoyantly. "By Jove, what an age it is since you went! And have you had a good time? When did you reach home? Tell us all about it! You've no idea how glad I am to have him back, Lord Garstin!" he added, greeting the elder man with a boyish, half-laughing apology for his exuberance which was very effective. His manner to Lord Garstin was as charming as ever ; rather more so, indeed, as its frank deference had acquired a polish derived from sundry little artistic touches such as only calculation and intention can bestow.

"You seem to have managed very well without me!" returned Loring, with good-humoured satire. "The world seems to have used you pretty fairly, I'm glad to see! I've only been back about forty-eight hours or I should have looked you up, of course. I hope Mrs. Romaine is here?"

"I hope she is better?" said Lord Garstin, with genuine concern. "We have all been desolated over her illness!"

Julian, who had nodded lightly to Loring, turned to Lord Garstin with a bright, affectionate laugh—also very like his mother's—and to Loring's quick and alert perception an added touch of artificiality became apparent in his manner as he said:

"It has been desolating, hasn't it? It's very good of you to say so, though! Thanks, I am delighted to say she is all right again. We had a terrific encounter as to whether she should or should not come to the affair, and she carried the day."

"Being perfectly restored to health she didn't see the

force of allowing herself to be shut up and coddled by a silly boy."

The light, high-pitched voice, somewhat thin, as was the characteristic laugh with which the words were spoken, came from directly behind Julian, and as Loring, who had seen her coming, stepped forward to meet her, Mrs. Romaine, with a passing shake of her son's arm, stretched out her hand with graceful cordiality.

"Welcome back, Mr. Loring," she said. "I thought your first visit would have been to this good-for-nothing boy, but I am very glad to meet you here all the same. Lord Garstin," she continued, as she turned to shake hands, "I believe you were enquiring after my health? I can't allow good breath to be wasted in that way! I assure you it has been much ado about nothing, and I am perfectly, ridiculously well!"

She laughed as she finished, but a certain strained insistence had grown in her tone as she spoke, as though her desire to impress the fact she stated was strong enough to undermine her control of her voice.

But Loring, looking at her, was too fully occupied in criticising her appearance to notice the tone of her voice. There must have been some society fraud at the bottom of her reported illness, he decided, and that was why she was so anxious to pass it over; for certainly he had never seen her look better. She was admirably dressed, and she was very slightly and skilfully "made up"; a condition new to him in her, and one of which Marston Loring emphatically approved in women past their first youth. He told himself, moreover, that either his impression of her had been fainter than the reality, or else she had actually gained in what he could only define to himself—and define roughly and inadequately as he was well aware—as "grip." There was the faintest flavour of nerve and concentration behind her admirable society manner, which gave it a wonderful piquancy in the eyes of her observer; a flavour which was evidently quite unconscious and involuntary, and had its origin in ingrain character. Loring admired power—of a certain class—in women.

In his interest in her expression, and his mental comments on it—determined, as they could not fail to be, by his own character—he was deceived by her cleverly arranged colouring into ignoring the almost painful thinness of her face; nor did



he understand how hollow and sunken those glittering eyes would have been less cleverly treated.

She replied gaily to Lord Garstin's gallant reception of her assurance, and then turned again to Loring with an easy interested question on his voyage.

"You are not the only returned traveller to-day!" she said, as he answered her. "By-the-bye, Julian, I was on the way to send you into the other room. There is some one there you will like to see!"

She smiled significantly up at him, patting his arm as she spoke, and Julian answered with boyish eagerness.

"In the other room?" he said. "Well, perhaps I ought just to say how do you do, you know, oughtn't I? Loring, old fellow, we shall meet again, of course? What are you going to do afterwards? We might go down to the club together? And he must come and dine with us, mustn't he, mother? Suppose you arrange it!" And with a comprehensive gesture and another, "I'll just say how do you do, I think!" he disappeared in the crowd.

Mrs. Romaine turned with a shrug of her shoulders and a pretty expressive grimace to the two men.

"Poor boy!" she laughed. "What a thing it is to be young! And what a tantalising spectacle a wedding must be under the circumstances! A pretty wedding, wasn't it?"

"An ugly wedding would be rather a refreshing change, don't you think?" suggested Loring. "One has seen a good many pretty ones, if you come to think of it!"

"You're not in the least changed by six months in Africa," returned Mrs. Romaine, shaking her head at him prettily. "Now, tell me, really, have you had a good time out there?"

The question was friendly and interested after a society fashion, but the interest was entirely on the surface, and the little talk that followed about Loring's experiences was joined in as a matter of course by Lord Garstin. It lasted until Mrs. Romaine said lightly:

"And now, I suppose, I ought to follow Julian's example and 'just say how do you do, don't you know!' I have only seen Mrs. Pomeroy in the distance as yet."

She nodded, and moved away, stopping constantly on her way through the rooms to exchange scraps of conversation until she came to where Mrs. Pomeroy, amiable, inert, and smiling as though she had been sitting there for the last three

months, was holding a small court. She welcomed Mrs. Romaine as she had welcomed all comers.

"So glad to see you," she said placidly. "Such a long time! And how are you?"

"So immensely pleased to have you back again," said Mrs. Romaine enthusiastically; there was a ring of genuineness in her voice which the fashionable exaggeration of her speech hardly warranted. "And you really only arrived yesterday? Miss Newton—Mrs. Compton, I mean—was in a dreadful state of mind the other day lest her bridesmaid should fail her. And how is Maud? How sweet she looked! Quite the prettiest of the six. Where is she?"

"She was here just now," returned Maud's mother, as though that were quite a satisfactory answer to the question, and then as an afterthought she added vaguely: "I think she went to have an ice; your son took her."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Romaine, smiling. "Then there is one perfectly happy person in the house!"

Mrs. Pomeroy only smiled with vague blandness; evidently the relations between the Romaines and the Pomeroy's had developed extensively before the departure of the latter for Cannes; and as evidently they were quite undisturbing to Miss Pomeroy's mother.

"The bridesmaids' dresses were very nice, I think," she said, with amiable irrelevancy. "I was afraid they sounded trying. But it has been very pleasant altogether, hasn't it? I wish we were going to stay in town. We had a shocking crossing."

A keen attention had sprung into Mrs. Romaine's eyes, and for an instant it seemed as though all the society gaiety died from her face, leaving exposed the hard, almost fiercely determined, foundation on which it was imposed. Then the foundation disappeared again.

"To stay in town!" she echoed lightly. "Why, are you not going to stay in town, dear Mrs. Pomeroy?"

"Unfortunately not," was the answer. "My sister who lives in Devonshire—I think you have heard me speak of her?—is ill, and has begged me to go and see her. So we are going for a week or ten days, I am sorry to say."

"I am sorry to hear," said Mrs. Romaine, with pretty concern. "Just at the beginning of the season, too. It's rather hard on poor Maud, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is hard on poor Maud, isn't it?" was the undisturbed response.

There was a moment's pause, and then under her paint a burning colour crept up to the very roots of Mrs. Romaine's hair, and her eyes shone.

"My dear Mrs. Pomeroy," she began gaily, but speaking rather quickly, too, and in a higher pitch than was usual with her, "don't you remember, months ago, promising to lend me Maud for a little while? This is the very opportunity. Of course," she lowered her voice a little, "I wouldn't propose it if you did not know quite as well as I do how the land lies. But, as I think we two old mothers are of one mind on that point, I shan't scruple. Let Maud come to me, if she will, while you are in Devonshire. Oh, of course it needn't mean anything—it's an old promise, you know, and she and I are great friends on our own account. Talk of the angels!" she went on gaily, nodding towards a slim, white figure coming towards them with Julian in its immediate wake.

Maud Pomeroy was looking as pretty and as proper as she had looked every day since she had emerged from the school-room, but there was a little flush on her face which was not habitual to her. She returned Mrs. Romaine's greeting with the grateful cordiality so pretty from a girl to an older woman, evinced as was her wont more by manner than by speech; and indeed Mrs. Romaine gave her little time for speech.

"Your mother has been telling me of this dreadful Devonshire business!" she said. "And I've had what I flatter myself is a happy thought! I want you to come to me, Maud, dear, while your mother is away. You know you promised ages ago to let yourself be lent to me for a little while, and this is the very opportunity, isn't it?"

It would not have been "the thing" under the circumstances that any one of the trio should glance at Julian; consequently no one noticed the curious flash of expression that passed across his face as his mother spoke. Maud Pomeroy hesitated and looked dutifully at her mother.

"It's very kind of Mrs. Romaine, Maud, dear, isn't it?" said Mrs. Pomeroy, with non-committal amiability.

"It is sweet of her," responded Maud prettily.

"Well, then, do let us consider it settled. I shall enjoy it of all things. When do you go, dear Mrs. Pomeroy? Tomorrow week? Oh, it would be too tantalising to whisk Maud

away when she had just begun to enjoy herself ; wouldn't it, Maud ? ”

Miss Pomeroy hesitated again, and the colour on her cheeks deepened by just a shade. She did not glance at her mother this time.

“ Thank you very much,” she said at last. “ But shan't I be a nuisance to you ? ”

There was just the touch of charmingly conventional demur in her tone which made her submission seem, as all her actions seemed, the result of a gentle, easily influenced temperament. Mrs. Romayne assured her merrily that she would indeed be a terrible nuisance, but that she herself would do her best to bear it, and then rose, her eyes very bright.

“ I must run away now,” she said. “ I'm so delighted that we've settled it. Let me know when to expect you, then, dear. Good-bye, Mrs. Pomeroy ; I'll take every care of your child and return her when you want her—only don't let it be too soon ! I needn't take you away, sir,” she continued, turning to Julian. He had been standing by ever since that flash had passed over his face with an expression of eager interest in the discussion. “ I dare say you're not in any hurry. No, you need not even come downstairs with me. I see Mr. Loring. He'll take care of me, I'm sure.”

Mr. Loring, who was within hearing, as the tone of the words implied—indeed, they were more than half addressed to him—came up promptly.

“ For how long may I have that privilege ? ” he said.

She explained to him lightly as he shook hands with Mrs. Pomeroy and her daughter, and then with another farewell and a pretty, affectionate “ *Au revoir !* ” to Julian, she turned away with him.

He put her into her carriage and she held out her hand with a gesture of thanks and farewell.

“ Thanks,” she said ; her tone and manner alike were very friendly and familiar in the exaggerated style which had certainly grown on her ; and they seemed to imply something beyond the superficial interest to which she had kept, perforce, in her society intercourse with him. “ It is so pleasant to see you again ! When will you come to see me quietly ? Before you are hard at work, you know ! To-morrow, now ? To-morrow happens to be a free day with me. Come to tea. Good-bye ! ”

## CHAPTER XXVI

TEN minutes after Mrs. Romaine's departure Julian was standing before Mrs. Pomeroy, his whole demeanour typical of the man who lingers, knowing that he should linger no longer.

"What a nuisance appointments are!" he said, with a boyish frankness of discontent which was irresistible. "I wish I could stay a little longer, but I know I oughtn't." He laughed quite ruefully, and fixed a pair of ardent eyes on Miss Pomeroy's demurely averted face. "It's been such an awfully jolly affair, hasn't it? And it's so awfully jolly to have you in town again"—this, with delightful deference, to Mrs. Pomeroy. "Well, I really must go, you know! Good-bye! Perhaps you won't be staying very much longer?"

"If you stay here bemoaning yourself very much longer we shall probably leave before you do!" suggested Miss Pomeroy, with the rather faint smile which was the only sign of amusement she ever gave, and which always accompanied her own mild witticisms. Julian turned to her eagerly.

"Now, that's awfully unkind!" he said. "You won't bully me like that in Queen Anne Street, will you?" The term "bullying" was so profoundly inapplicable to Miss Pomeroy's words that its use suggested a certain amount of arrangement rather than absolute spontaneity about Julian's speech. But exaggeration was the fashion, and not to be commented on. "Come in a very kind frame of mind, won't you?" he went on pleadingly.

"Am I a very violent person?" the girl answered, with the same smile. "Good-bye!" She held out her hand as she spoke, and Julian took it with laughing reluctance.

"You are an absolutely heartless person," he said daringly, "to dismiss me like this! However, I suppose you are right. If you didn't dismiss me I probably shouldn't go, and I really ought, you know!"

"You've told us that before; now do it!" was the answer. "Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" returned Julian, with mock meekness. He

shook hands again, which seemed hardly necessary, and then he turned away.

But the necessity which enforced his departure had apparently slackened its pressure on him by the time he actually left the house. As he walked away down the street there was no sign about him of that haste which should characterise a man who has lingered to the risking of an appointment, or who has, indeed, any engagement in immediate prospect. The bride and bridegroom had already left, and people were beginning to go, and until he reached the end of the street in which was Mrs. Halse's house, he was passed every instant by carriages to whose occupants his hat had to be smilingly lifted. Then he turned into a main thoroughfare, and hailed a hansom—still not in the least like a man in a hurry. He gave the cabman an address in the Temple, and was driven away.

His face as he went would have been a curious study to any onlooker possessed of the key to its expression; to any onlooker who could have detected the constant struggle for dominance between something that seemed to lie behind its new artificiality and that artificiality itself, evidently maintained under an instinctive sense of the chances of observation. It was not until he turned his key in the lock of a set of chambers in the Temple that the boyish vivacity died wholly out of his face; he went into his room—he shared the chambers with another embryo barrister—shutting the door behind him; and as he did so he seemed to have shut in, not the light-hearted young fellow who had paid the cabman in the street below, but another man altogether. No one looking at him now could doubt that this was the real Julian Romaine of to-day, as certainly as that light-hearted young fellow had been the real Julian Romaine of a year ago. This was a man with a hard, angry face; a face on which the anger stood revealed, not as the expression of the moment, but as the normal expression of a mind always sore, always at war, always fiercely implacable.

The room was plainly, almost barely furnished, and there was no trace of any of the luxury that surrounded him in Queen Anne Street. His smart, carefully got-up figure looked absolutely incongruous among such unusual surroundings, as he crossed to the window, and flinging himself down in a shabby easy-chair, lighted a cigarette. He threw his cigarette-case on the table, and then drew out of the breast-pocket of his coat a couple of letters.

He had read them before, evidently, but as evidently they had lost none of their interest for him. He read them both through attentively, and as he did so there came to his mouth a set which his mother, could she have seen it, would have recognised instantly; which any one, indeed, must have recognised who had ever seen his dead father. Both the letters dealt with money matters; one was from a bookmaker, the other from a broker whose name was far from bearing an unblemished character in the City; and both referred to large sums of money recently made on the turf and on the Stock Exchange by Julian Romaine.

He flung the last on the table as he finished it, and there was an expression in his eyes of reckless, rebellious triumph not good to see.

"It's a good haul!" he said, half aloud. "A good haul! Now, with what I've got already——" He rose and went across to the writing-table, unlocked a drawer, and taking out various papers, began to make rapid calculations.

Then—his eyes hard and intent on his work—he stretched out his hand and felt in the drawer for another paper. He took out an envelope, and drew out the letter it contained without glancing at it. A folded paper fell out as he did so, and as though the slight sound had roused him, he glanced at it quickly, and from it to the open letter in his hand. Apparently it was not the letter to which he had intended to refer, for his face changed suddenly and completely.

"I can't take your money. Try and understand that I can't!—Clemence."

His fingers tightened upon the thin sheet of paper until the knuckles whitened, and the eager calculation vanished utterly from his face, overwhelmed as it seemed by the fierce tumult of warring passions that struggled now in every line. Impotent anger which was the more violent for something within itself which was not anger; reckless defiance; a wild, raging desperation behind all, which was nearly hatred; all these emotions were faintly shadowed forth on his face as he stared down at the few simple words. All these emotions had been surging in his heart during the six months that were gone, and it was their unceasing strife and tumult which was rousing into life the new Julian Romaine, latent for so many years.

It was to that which was least broadly painted on his face that all these passionate forces owed their life. As with a wild

animal wounded by a dart, and feeling that dart—lodged in his side—pricking and piercing him, who plunges wildly hither and thither, chafing and striving in blind, brute fashion to rid himself of the sensation he cannot understand; and in his very efforts presses in the cause of his pain, increases his sufferings, and again redoubles his struggles and his fury, not knowing that he is his own tormentor; so it had been, in a sense, with Julian Romaine during the last six months. The dart in his case was double-edged; its edges were the strange, weak reality of his love for Clemence, and a stinging sense of shame. It had lodged in that almost inanimate better part of his nature. He had left that little room in Camden Town smarting and wincing under it, and it had never ceased to prick him since. Scarcely less blind and ignorant under such circumstances than “a beast having no understanding” in his total want of all principle, except the principles of worldly wisdom, with his utterly dormant moral perception—his morality, such as it was, being the merest matter of habit and conventionality—the effect on him of the smart was first the developement in him of a blind, unreasoning resentment; and then, as anger proved of no avail, a passionate rousing and rising of all his latent forces in repudiation of his discomfort.

To charge upon some one else the difficulties which he had created for himself, to provide some object against which his blind sense of wrath and rebellion could pit itself, was a primary instinct with such a nature as Julian's, so situated, and that object was ready to his hand. The first article in the faith of the new Julian Romaine was the belief that he had been forced into his present position by his mother; that he had been parted from his wife by his mother; that he had been covered with humiliation by his mother. Every fresh stab, every movement of revolt, as that two-edged dart pressed itself deeper into his consciousness with every struggle he made for freedom, added something to the account he held against her; increased the bitterness of his resentment against her, and brought it one degree nearer to hatred. His love for her, in spite of its charm of expression, had been the merest boyish sentiment; with no roots deeper than those afforded by easy companionship and apparent indulgence; founded on habit and expediency rather than on respect. Real devotion would have seemed out of place in the atmosphere of affectation and superficiality in which he had been reared, and he had known only its travesty. On



this, the first real conflict between his will and hers, that travesty showed itself for what it was, and shrivelled into nothingness. To free himself from her control, became the one object and desire of his life. In doing this, and in doing this only, to his distorted perceptions, lay release from the stinging, goading misery of his present life, and to do this one means only was adequate—money. With money at his command the victory, as he conceived it, would be his. Some centre, some mainspring had necessarily to grow up in the confused strivings and blind, desperate impulses of a newly-awakened nature, and gradually that centre had declared itself in an unreasoning determination to make money.

But there were in Julian Romayne tendencies, latent, or nearly so, throughout his youth and early manhood; manifested during those easy, untempted periods only in a slight superficiality, a slight want of perception as to the boundary line between truth and falsehood; but radical factors in his being. In the shock and jar of the mental struggle and quickening involved in the continued presence in his consciousness of that remorseless dart, these tendencies leapt into over-stimulated life and grew, strengthened, and developed, with the unnatural rapidity of such life, until his whole character seemed to be overshadowed by them. In Julian Romayne's being, woven in and out with the threads which had hitherto seemed so pliable and colourless; those threads of all shades, from pure white to dark grey, which make up character in every man; were sundry grim black threads—threads such as are only to be plucked out when the very heart's blood of the man has spent itself in the struggle, and when in that struggle he has come very near to God. It may be that the sins of the fathers are indeed visited on the children in this sense; in the dictation of the form taken by that struggle with evil which is every man's portion; and sometimes—for purposes of which no man may presume to judge—in the exceptional agony of that struggle. Julian Romayne, the son of a liar and thief, and, moreover, of a woman whose morality was the morality of conventionality and nothing more, had an instinctive faculty for, an instinctive inclination towards, dishonesty of word and deed. Such a twist of his moral consciousness as had been predicted for him, a little child of five years old, by Dr. Aston, had lain dormant among the possibilities of his being throughout the nineteen years that intervened. It was this inheritance which, in the

sudden upheaval of his moral nature, had awakened, asserted itself, and seized, as it were, the first place in his nature.

Throughout his boyhood, easy as it had been, untouched by any strong passion or desire, he had lied now and again, naturally and instinctively. He had lied to save himself trouble, to save himself some slight reproach—as he had lied to his mother on the subject of his visit to Alexandria, to save himself from the confession of having forgotten her commission. He had lied to Clemence from first to last, and the first prick of that dart, which was now his constant companion, had touched him when he first felt shame for those lies. But there was a reckless, calculating deception about his life now which went deeper and meant more. He lied to his mother with every word and action, and with the unreasoning cruelty of his mental attitude towards her—there is nothing towards which a man can be so heartless as the object to which he has transferred his own wrong-doing—he hugged his deception of her, and revelled in the sense of independence and power it gave him. The endless deception which the fundamental falsity of his present life necessitated, radiated on every side. To please his mother, as he told himself with an ugly smile, he had flirted with Miss Pomeroy in the early part of the winter until—a certain distance in her manner to him melting—he had hailed her departure for Cannes as a blessed reprieve. He had flirted with her this afternoon at Mrs. Halse's, excited by the news contained in the two letters he had since re-read, reckless in the prospect of release they brought nearer to him, and with a certain delight in the daring defiance of consequences. He had lied to Lord Garstin when that good-natured mentor had let fall a warning word as to the "bad form" of gambling; he lied to his coach when his frequent absences were commented on.

In that desperate craving for money, in which all the passion of his life was centering itself, dishonesty of deed was the natural and inevitable corollary of dishonesty of word. The possession of money was his one object in life; his conscience as to the means by which that money was to be obtained he deliberately put into abeyance for the time being. He had become possessed in the course of the last six months of some thousands, not one of which had been earned by honest work; much of which had come to him by more than questionable means.

That two-edged dart must have been finely tempered that it never seemed to blunt! The dormant life in that higher part of him, to which it had penetrated, must have been life indeed, that it should throb and quiver stronger and stronger, side by side with all that was lowest and worst in him, making the struggle grow always fiercer, and goading him on and on. The dart owed its edge, the life its growing sensitiveness, to a touch which lay always on Julian's consciousness, haunting him night and day. Not to be driven away or obliterated; not to be crowded out of his soul by any stress of evil passion; a white light on the soiled, tangled web of his life, which shone steadily in the strength of a power no struggle of his could touch; was the thought of Clemence. Clemence, who had trusted him; Clemence, hoping, longing, loving him, as he knew in every wretched fibre; Clemence, for whose presence he longed at times with a heart-sickness of longing which reacted in a very orgy of passionate bitterness. He had received a note from her a few days after her disappearance, telling him in a few simple words that she had got work; that she relied on him not to drive her out of it by trying to see her, until he "was ready," as she phrased it. Again and again a reckless impulse to see her, and force his will upon her, had seized him, but something had always held him back. Again and again he had sent her money, always to have it returned to him with a little line of hope or patience. In the reception of those notes; in the writhing love, and longing, and shame they stirred in him, the dart went home and tortured him indeed.

He crushed the sheet of common note-paper almost fiercely in his hand now, and thrust it away to the back of the drawer from which it had come. He caught up the paper which had fallen from it—the cheque he had sent her three days before—and tore it savagely into fragments. Then he swept the papers on which he had been busy unheedingly into a drawer, locked it sharply, and rose, white to the very lips.

"It can't be long now," he muttered. "It shan't be! Men make their piles in a day—in an hour; why should not I? It shan't be long!"

He stood for a moment, his hand clenched, his features compressed, his eyes full of a sullen fire. Then he turned sharply away and left the room.

There was no trace of any fire about him, however, except

the harmless irradiation of youth and good spirits, when he opened the door of his mother's drawing-room a few minutes before their dinner-hour. He had spent the intervening hour at his club, the most lightly good-natured, and thoroughly easy-going and irresponsible young man there, and there was precisely the same character about him now as he crossed the room to his mother.

## CHAPTER XXVII

THERE had been a slight, sudden movement as Julian opened the door, as though Mrs. Romaine had changed her attitude quickly. She was leaning forward now, looking at an illustrated paper, but the cushions behind her were tumbled and crushed, as if she had been leaning back on them, and leaning heavily. She was wearing a tea-gown, and she seemed to keep her face rather carefully in shadow.

"Rather an amusing party, wasn't it?" she said lightly, looking up as he came in. "Everybody goes to that woman's. I can't imagine why. Well, and is there any news, sir?"

"I'm afraid not," returned Julian gaily. "I've spent an hour at the club to try and pick up some crumbs for you, but there was nothing going."

The manner of each to the other was precisely the same, now that they were alone together, as it had been when they addressed one another incidentally in the course of general conversation. The very familiarity between them had a flavour of artificiality about it, and that flavour was mainly given, strangely enough, by Mrs. Romaine rather than by Julian. It was her manner, not his, that lacked ease and overdid the spontaneity. They chatted brightly about men and things, but she never asked him a single personal question, though at any incidental allusion let fall by him as to his doings a faint contraction of the muscles about her eyes gave her a hungry, concentrated look, as of a creature catching at a crumb. It seemed to be in a great measure that tendency to keen intentness of expression which had so greatly altered her face.

"You see I've been lazy!" she said lightly, indicating her dress with a slight gesture as they sat down to dinner. They were going out in the evening, and she usually dressed before dinner on such occasions. "I really couldn't be bothered to dress before!"

The lamplight was full on her face now, and Julian, his attention drawn to her by the words, saw that she looked frightfully haggard and worn under her paint and her little air

of gaiety. Paint had ceased to be an appendage of full dress with her since her three days' illness. The combination added a touch of repulsion to his feeling towards her. But his tone as he answered her was the tone of affectionate concern, over-elaborated by the merest shade only.

"You've not over-tired yourself, I hope, dear?" he said. "I don't believe you ought to go out again to-night, do you know!"

Mrs. Romaine's thin fingers were tearing fiercely at the pocket-handkerchief in her lap as he spoke, and her eyes were bright with pain. It seemed as though her ears had caught that subtle shade of over-elaboration, though they must have been quick indeed to do so. But she answered, almost before he had finished speaking, in a rather high-pitched tone of eager determination.

"Silliest of boys," she said; "the topic is threadbare. I am quite well! Oh, it is very evident that my retiring to bed for a day or two is an unparalleled event, or you would not be quite so slow in grasping the fact that it is possible to recover after such a terrific crisis! Now, do promise not to talk any more about what you don't in the least understand!"

The merriment of her tone was fictitious, even to Julian's unheeding ear, but he took it up with a mental shrug of his shoulders. It was not his fault, he told himself, if she would overdo herself for the sake of a little excitement.

He told himself the same thing, carelessly enough, when he put her into her carriage two or three hours later. It was early; Mrs. Romaine had declared the party to be insufferably dull and had stayed only half an hour, during which time she had been as vivacious and attractive as usual. But towards the end her eyes had become feverishly bright, and Julian, as he took her out, could feel that she was trembling from head to foot.

"Are you coming home?" she said to him.

"Well, if you don't mind, dear, I was thinking of going to look up Loring at the club."

A breath of relief parted Mrs. Romaine's lips, and she answered hastily. Apparently she had no desire for her son's company on her way home.

"Go, by all means!" she said. "Of course I don't mind!"

She pulled up the window almost abruptly, nodding to him

with a smile, the singular ghastliness of which was, presumably, referable to some effect of gaslight. Then as the carriage rolled away she sank back and let her face relax into an expression of utter weariness, with a little gasping catch of her breath as of deadly physical exhaustion.

His words about Loring had been a mere figure of speech on Julian's part, but he did intend to go to the club, and he carried his intention into effect. He glanced round the smoking-room as he went in to see if Loring was there, but the fact that he was not visible in no way affected his serenity. He was so altered from the boy of a twelvemonth before, and his intercourse with Loring had been so completely suspended during the period of his developement, that their friendship seemed now to belong to some previous phase of his existence; it was his sense that he had passed utterly out of touch with the man with whom he had once been intimate, together with a conviction that Loring's keen perceptions would be by no means a desirable factor in his surroundings at the moment, that had dictated his demonstration of delight at Loring's reappearance. An outward show of enthusiasm was a very effective blind, in his opinion.

His manner was regulated on the same principle on Loring's appearance in the smoking-room about half an hour later. He was on his way to the card-room, and he was anything but pleased at the frustration of his plans in that direction; but his reception of Loring indicated, rather, that he had spent the last half-hour in watching for him.

"Here you are at last, old man!" he cried. "I thought you'd turn up some time or other! What became of you this afternoon? I never saw you after you disappeared with my mother."

The two men had met close to the door, and they were still standing, Loring, as *blasé* and imperturbable-looking as usual, with his observant eyes on Julian's face.

"I didn't care to spoil sport!" he returned with a significant smile. "You seemed to be particularly well employed!"

Julian laughed—the conscious, not ill-pleased laugh which belonged to his part. Such contingencies were all incidental to the situation.

"Oh, come, old boy," he said deprecatingly. Then he laughed again, and added: "I suppose my mother said something to you?"

"No!" returned Loring quietly. "I happen to have eyes, you see!"

"Don't make magnifying glasses of them, then!" was the laughing retort. "Now then, there are several fellows here who have been asking for you."

But as Julian glanced round he became aware that the room chanced to be almost empty. Loring understood at the same time that he had wished to make the conversation general and impersonal, and a slight smile touched his lips.

Marston Loring had various reasons of his own for not intending to allow himself to be eluded by Julian Romaine. The change in the young man alone would have excited his curiosity; and sundry details which had already come to his knowledge, notably one across which he had stumbled in the City that morning, had quickened that curiosity. His suspicions of the preceding autumn, that there was something behind Julian's life as it appeared on the surface, were by no means forgotten by him. His departure for Africa had taken him out of the way of the crisis, but he more than half suspected that a crisis there had been. The connection between the present and the past, and the means by which it could be most advantageously applied to the furtherance of his own ends, were the problems he had set himself to solve.

"We're rather in luck!" he said. "We can have a quiet chat together."

He established himself lazily and comfortably as he spoke, as Julian with much apparent satisfaction flung himself into another chair, and took out his cigar-case.

Julian's questions followed one another thick and fast. His interest in his friend's life during the last six months seemed to be inexhaustible in its intelligence and sympathy. He had a great deal to tell, too; and he told it so fluently and gaily as almost to disguise the fact that the allusions to his own doings were of the most superficial type. But at last there was a pause. Julian was pulling out his watch, and saying something about going home, when Loring lighted a fresh cigar and opened the proceedings—as he conceived them.

"I heard of you in the City this morning!" he said nonchalantly.

There was no pause in the movement with which Julian returned his watch to his pocket; nothing, absolutely, to betray the fact that the words were a surprise to him. Yet they were



a surprise, and an exceedingly unpleasant one. His transactions in the City he had arranged to keep secret ; that their nature should become known was eminently undesirable, and he had decided that the fact itself would be inconsistent with his pose before the world. That Loring should be the man to unearth them was exceptionally unfortunate.

"Did you?" he said lightly ; "and who was saying what of me in the City—a vague locality, by-the-bye."

"The introduction of your name was accidental—accidents will happen, you know, even in Adams's office. Is that a definite locality enough to please you?"

Julian burst into a boyish laugh and flung himself back in his chair ; he carried his cigar to his lips as he did so, not noticing apparently that it had gone out. Loring noticed it, however.

"What a fellow you are, Loring!" he cried. "You've not been in England three days before you unearth a poor chap's most private little games! I say, you'll keep it dark, won't you? I wouldn't have it come round to my mother, you know! She's so awfully generous to me, and it might hurt her feelings."

There was an ingenuous frankness and confidence in his voice which gave to the whole affair the aspect of a youthful escapade. Loring smiled as he answered :

"I wouldn't have a hand in hurting Mrs. Romaine's feelings for the world." He paused a moment, and then added carelessly, as if the whole transaction was the merest matter of course : "Been doing much?"

Julian shook his head.

"No, of course not," he said lightly. "Only a little occasional lark, don't you know. I leave the big things to clever fellows like you. By-the-bye, Loring, I'd no idea you did anything in that way."

Loring puffed slowly at his cigar before he answered.

"I'm an old hand," he said nonchalantly. "I wait for certainties, my boy!" He paused again. "To tell you the truth," he said slowly, fastening a keen, cleverly-veiled gaze on Julian's face, "I did not ask the question altogether idly. It occurred to me that if you had made anything worth mentioning you might be on the look-out for a means of—well, we'll put it mildly and say—increasing it."

There was considerable meaning in Loring's voice, careless

as it was. Julian became very still, and into his eyes there crept an eager, hungry light which harmonised ill with the fixed nonchalance of the rest of his features as he answered with a laugh :

"I don't know the fellow who could refuse to admit that soft impeachment ! We're all in the same boat as far as that goes, I take it. You haven't got a good thing up your sleeve, old man, have you ?"

Loring smiled ambiguously.

"Most 'good things' would come to an untimely end if every one with a finger in them spread them abroad, my boy !" he observed. "Since it can't concern you personally—if you've no capital—we'll say no more about it."

A certain amount of Loring's practice dealt with financial affairs ; he was no mean authority on City matters, and there was something about his manner indescribably provocative. Julian leaned forward with a movement of irrepressible eagerness.

"Is it really a good thing ?" he said. He spoke with a quick, low-toned directness which put aside the fencing of the previous dialogue, and replied not to what Loring had said, but to what he had implied. Loring looked him full in the face and answered laconically and significantly :

"Rather !"

The hungry light was burning fiercely in Julian's eyes, and he turned his face away from Loring and began to fidget with an ash-tray lying on the table by him.

"Capital ?" he said. "What do you call capital, now ?"

"Oh, anything between ten thousand and five-and-twenty thousand," said Loring carelessly.

There was a silence. Julian's brain was working feverishly, and Loring was well content to let it work. At last Julian began to speak in a low, rapid tone, with the air of one who has made up his mind to frank confidence. He had intended to keep Loring at arm's length ; he had decided now to play a bolder game, and use him.

"Look here, Loring," he said, "I may as well make a clean breast of it ! I have gone a bit farther than I said. You see, as I told you, my mother's most awfully generous, and I wouldn't let a hint of this get to her for the world ; but a man doesn't like to feel that he's dependent on his mother for everything, don't you know—especially if he's thinking of

marrying. You know what it is when one once begins to feel the money come in! I've gone on, you see—as lots of fellows do—and I've got a tidy little pile. Of course I'm very keen on making it more before—well, before I propose, don't you know! And if you can give me a lift up I shall be eternally obliged."

He stopped, and Loring smoked for a minute or two in silence. At last he said slowly:

"I understand! It's natural, of course. Well, I don't stand alone in the affair, to tell you the truth. There's another man to be consulted. But I'll talk the matter over with him, and if I can manage to get you in you may be sure I will. You shall have a line in a day or two, or I'll see you again." Loring dropped the end of his cigar into the ash-tray and rose.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

THE clock in Mrs. Romaine's drawing-room chimed the half-hour—half-past four—and Mrs. Romaine glanced up as she heard it. She was alone, sitting at her writing-table answering invitations. She was looking better than she had looked on the preceding day—less haggard, and physically stronger.

She answered and put aside the last invitation-card, and then she drew out a letter in a straight, clear, girl's writing. It was signed : " Affectionately yours, Maud Pomeroy," and it bore reference to Miss Pomeroy's prospective visit to her. Mrs. Romaine glanced through it, the vigour of her face seeming to accentuate as she did so, and then proceeded to write a few cordial, affectionate lines in answer. She was just directing the envelope when a servant came in with tea.

Mrs. Romaine rose.

" Send these letters to the post," she said.

She glanced at the clock again as she spoke, and at that moment the front-door bell rang.

Left alone, Mrs. Romaine moved quickly to the looking-glass, and took an anxious, critical look at herself ; it was as though she had learnt to distrust her appearance. The inspection, however, proved satisfactory, apparently ; and as she turned quickly away as she heard steps upon the stairs, there was a self dependence and sense of power in the bright, expectant keenness of her eyes.

" Mr. Loring !" announced the servant, and Mr. Loring followed his name into the room.

" I am very glad to see you," said Mrs. Romaine, advancing to meet him. " This is a much better way of welcoming a friend than our meeting yesterday. I think I shall celebrate the occasion by saying not at home to any one else. Julian will be in, perhaps, and he will like to have you to himself. Not at home, Dawson," she added in conclusion.

There was a verve and brightness about her manner which was not exactly its usual vivacity, and which faintly suggested the presence of some kind of special excitement in her mind.

Loring's perceptions were in a state of rather abnormal acuteness; the situation had meanings for him, which had braced up his forces not inconsiderably. He detected that inward excitement about Mrs. Romaine instantly, and he was convinced also, though he could hardly have given a reason for the conviction, that there was not the smallest chance of Julian's appearance. Both circumstances he reckoned as points in his favour in the game he was going to play.

"It's very charming of you," he said. "Do you know this is the first time I have really felt that coming back to London means—something."

He took the chair she had indicated to him on the other side of the little tea-table as he spoke, and there was nothing lame or unfinished about the words spoken as he spoke them. His eyes were fixed upon Mrs. Romaine, but she was pouring out tea with so intent a look on her face as almost to suggest preoccupation. She did not look up, nor did the tone of his voice reach her, except superficially, apparently, for she replied with a pleasant, friendly laugh.

"I should hope it did mean 'something,' indeed," she said. "Friends should count for 'something,' surely, especially when they have really taken the trouble to miss you very much. Have you had such an unusually fascinating time in Africa, then?"

She handed him a cup of tea, and as he rose to take it from her, he answered:

"Well, not exactly that. I'm afraid I don't believe in fascinating times, you know. Perhaps I am too much of a pessimist."

He spoke with that tone of personal revelation and confidence which is always more or less attractive to a woman, coming from a man; and Mrs. Romaine responded with the gentle loftiness of sympathy which the position demanded.

"I've often been afraid you felt like that," she said. "And it is really quite wrong of you, don't you know. You ought to be such a particularly well-satisfied person! I suppose you are horribly ambitious? Now, tell me, has your business gone off as well as you hoped? I have been so interested in your delightful articles!"

"Does anything go off as well as one had hoped?" was the reply, spoken with a cynical smile, indeed, but with a certain daring deprecation of her disapproval, which was not unat-

tractive. "No, I ought not to carp," he continued quickly. "I have every reason to be satisfied."

His tone implied considerably more in the way of success and latent possibilities about his present position than the words themselves conveyed; and Mrs. Romaine answered with cordial, delicately-expressed congratulations, which drifted into a species of general questionings as to his doings, less directly personal, but implying that he might count on her sympathy if he chose to confide in her in greater detail. This was no part of Loring's plan, however. He led by almost imperceptible degrees away from the subject, and before very long they were talking London gossip as though he had never been away, the only perceptible result of his absence evincing itself in the touch of additional intimacy which his return seemed to have given their relations, necessarily at Mrs. Romaine's instigation.

The talk touched here and there, and by-and-by an enquiry from Loring after a mutual friend elicited a crisper laugh than usual, and an expressive movement of the eyebrows, from Mrs. Romaine.

"Haven't you heard?" she said. "Oh it's an old story now, of course! Well, they don't come to town this season, I believe. Lady Ashton suffers from—neuralgia!"

She laughed again, and then in response to a cynical and incredulously interrogative ejaculation from Loring, she clasped her hands lightly on her knee and went on with the animation of a woman who has a good story to tell and enjoys telling it.

"She contracted the complaint, they say, in a poky little church in Kensington into which Gladys Ashton strolled one morning and got herself married. Oh, dear no! Her mother wasn't there! That's one of the points of the affair. And Lord Rochdale wasn't there either."

"Gladys Ashton jilted Rochdale after all!"

"After all!" assented Mrs. Romaine gaily. "After all that poor woman's trouble, after the quite pathetic way in which she has slaved to catch him, she gets a letter from the ungrateful girl—at an afternoon tea, too, heaps of people there—to say that she is Mrs. Bob Stewart. Baccarat Bob you wretched men at the club call him, don't you?"

"That was enough to induce convulsions, let alone neuralgia," commented Loring.

They both laughed, and the laugh was succeeded by a moment's silence. Then Loring said casually :

"What has become of your cousin, Falconer, among other people, by-the-bye? I don't hear anything of him, and his grim presence was hardly to be overlooked. Have you any little escapade of his to reveal, now?"

Mrs. Romaine laughed a little harshly.

"Unfortunately not," she said. "His absence is due to the most characteristically orthodox causes. He was ill about three months ago. He went into a hospital sort of place—one of those new things—and he was rather bad. Now he's somewhere or other recovering. I fancy he won't be in London again yet."

Loring received the news with a comment as indifferent as his question had been, and then there fell a second silence. Loring's eyes, very keen and calculating, were fixed upon the carpet; on Mrs. Romaine's face was an accentuation of the intent, preoccupied look which had lain behind all her previous gaiety. The two faces suggested curiously that the man and woman alike felt individually and each irrespective of the other that something in the shape of a prologue was over, and that the real interest of the interview might begin.

The silence was broken by Mrs. Romaine; she pushed the tea-table further from her and leaned back in her chair, as she said casually :

"Did you and Julian meet at the club last night?"

Loring followed her example and took an easier and more careless pose.

"Yes!" he said. "We had an hour's talk together. I was very glad I had looked in. I hardly expected to find him there!"

Mrs. Romaine laughed, and the sound was rather forced.

"Oh," she said lightly, "he is a tremendous clubbist! All young men go through the phase, don't you think?" She paused a moment, and her voice sounded as though her breath was coming rather quickly as she said carelessly :

"You find him a good deal altered, I dare say? Six months"—she paused; her breath was troublesome—"six months makes such a difference at his time of life!" she finished.

Loring looked at her. He had long ago decided that when a woman was "made up" it was of very little use to direct observation to anything but her eyes.

"Yes!" he said reflectively, as though debating a question already existing in his mind, and answering it for the first time. "He is altered! I suppose—yes, I suppose six months must make a difference!"

A sharp breath as at a sudden stab of pain had parted Mrs. Romaine's lips at his first words, and he saw a hard, defiant brightness come into her eyes.

"I was very glad to see—well, may one allude to what one could not help seeing yesterday?" he went on in another and much lighter tone.

"One may allude to it confidentially!" returned Mrs. Romaine, and her tone was rather high-pitched and uneven. "Not otherwise, I am sorry to say—at present! Did Julian say anything about it?" Her tone as she asked the question was carelessness itself, but her fingers were tightly clenched round her handkerchief as she waited for the answer.

"A word or two!" returned Loring. "I inferred that it was only a question of time. Has it been going on long?"

"All the winter!" she answered, and again there was that little forced laugh. "You see, unfortunately, 'she' has been away! I had hoped that it would have come off before she went away, but it didn't!"

She stopped rather abruptly; and Loring, watching her keenly, said:

"You think it is time he should marry?"

"I think—well, yes, I suppose I do! Don't you agree with me? You young men are so apt to get into mischief, you know!"

"I suppose I can hardly deny the general principle," answered Loring with a slight smile, "though it is some time since I have been a young man in any practical sense! But as to Julian, I hardly know——"

"But you must know!" returned Mrs. Romaine quickly, and with an affected laugh. "And you must know, in the first place, that I'm relying on you for a good deal of co-operation—oh, of course, not in these delicate affairs!"

A certain shade of attention—just that attention which might become gravely or gaily sympathetic according to the demand made upon him—appeared in Loring's manner. He replied to her last words with a gesture of mock deprecation which answered the tone in which they were spoken; but a quiet, reliable interest touched his voice as he spoke,



which seemed to respond rather to the possibilities of the situation.

"You have only to command me!" he said.

There was a hungry intentness about Mrs. Romaine's mouth now, and about her clenched hand, which only a tremendous effort and the sacrifice of all reality of tone could have kept out of her voice.

"To tell you the truth," she said lightly, "there was rather a catastrophe in the autumn; a girl, you know, silly boy—the usual thing! I fancy it has upset him a good deal in every way, and there is nothing like marriage for settling a young man down after such an affair!"

She paused as though—while her confidence in her statement, and the point of view from which she had presented the matter stood in no need of confirmation—she yet craved to hear it subscribed to by another voice. And Loring nodded with grave, attentive assent.

"Quite so!" he said sententiously.

"Now, of course," she continued, "of course a woman can't know all the ins and outs of a young man's life, even when she's his mother. It's out of the question; and to be very frank with you"—there was something painful now about the lightness of her tone—"his mother had to be rather autocratic, and the boy didn't much like it. Consequently I can't feel sure that—well, that she knows even as much as she might about his affairs, now! That's why I'm confiding in you in this expansive way! I want you to look after him for me!"

Loring changed his position, and nodded again gravely and comprehendingly.

"I understand!" he said slowly. "I understand!" The statement was true in far wider sense than Mrs. Romaine could be aware of. There was a moment's silence, during which he seemed to deliberate deeply on the facts presented to him, watched intently by Mrs. Romaine; and then he roused himself, as it were. "I won't say that your confidence in me gives me great pleasure," he said, "because I hope you know that. I will simply say that I will do all I can!"

The words were admirably spoken, with a gentleness and consideration of tone and manner which were all the more striking from their contrast with his usual demeanour; and they carried an impression of strength and sympathy such as no woman could have resisted. A strange spasm as of intense

relief passed across Mrs. Romaine's face, and for the moment she did not speak. Then she said low and hurriedly :

"I have heard that he plays, and it—it worries me ! A boy will often listen to a friend whom he respects, and—and—I rely on you."

"I consider myself honoured !"

A pause followed, and then Loring continued with an easy seriousness which was very reassuring :

"I am very glad to know all this, for it gives me a key, without which I might have blundered considerably ! To return confidence for confidence, and to assure you that I really have some power to help you, I will say that I made a little discovery about Julian yesterday which perplexed me a good deal. I shall know now how to act. If he must speculate——"

He was interrupted. The daintily coloured face before him changed suddenly and terribly ; a ghastly reality that lay behind that expression of carelessness seemed on the instant to crash through all veils and masks as Mrs. Romaine rose to her feet with a hoarse cry, her face drawn and working, her hands stretched out as though to ward off something unendurably horrible.

"No !" she gasped, and she was absolutely fighting and struggling for breath, as though something clutched at her throat. "Not that ! oh, good heavens, not that ! You must stop it ! You must prevent it. He must not ! He must not ! Do you hear me ? He must not !"

There are some natures which not even contact with throbbing, vibrating reality can touch or thrill, and Loring, surprised, indeed, had risen also, cynical, imperturbable, and cool-headed as usual.

"By Jove !" he said to himself critically. "Who would have thought she had it in her ?" The choked, agonised voice stopped abruptly, and he met her eyes, wild and fierce in their desperate command, and said quickly and soothingly :

"I will do anything you wish, I assure you ! You have only to speak ! I am grieved beyond all words to have distressed you so ! I had no idea——"

A hoarse laugh broke from Mrs. Romaine, and she turned away with a strange gesture almost as though it were herself she derided, and Loring was forgotten by her, clasping her hands fiercely over her face. Loring paused a moment and then went on smoothly :

"There is nothing to disturb you, I assure you, in what I was going to say. Most young men have a turn for dabbling in speculation at some time or other, and though I know some ladies have a horror of it, I don't think you would find that there is much foundation for that horror." He stopped somewhat abruptly. He had suddenly remembered that he was speaking to the widow of William Romaine, of whose final collapse he knew the outline. He looked at the woman before him with her hidden face, her figure rigid and tense from head to foot, and thought to himself callously how curious these survivals of emotion were. She did not move or speak, and he went on with a tone of delicate sympathy :

"No doubt, if you really think it well to stop it with a high hand, it can be done! I ought to say that I have rather broken confidence in revealing Julian's doings, as he is very anxious that you should not think him dissatisfied or ungrateful, and did not wish you to hear of them." A shiver shook the bowed figure from head to foot. "I'm afraid I thought more of reassuring you than of him! I thought that if you knew that he and I were in the same affair, and that he would act solely on my advice, you would, perhaps, feel happier about him!"

But the answer he wanted, the answer which would have enabled him to continue his reassurances on the purely personal line, was not forthcoming. Mrs. Romaine neither spoke nor moved. He had no intention of risking his position by foolhardiness, so he adjusted his line of argument to the darkness in which her silence left him.

"As I said, however," he continued gently, "if you prefer to talk to him on the subject, and ask him to give it up, no doubt he will do so rather than distress you! And if you lay your commands on me to that effect, I will certainly refuse to go any further with him! But may I say that I think you would be wiser to let things take their course? It is not a good thing to thwart a young man in the frame of mind you have hinted at as being Julian's at present. If you can conquer your horror of the idea, I am sure you will be better satisfied in the end!"

There was a dead silence. At last Mrs. Romaine raised her head slowly, not turning her face towards Loring, but looking straight before her, as though utterly oblivious of his

personal presence. There was a strange, fleeting dignity about her drawn face, with its wide, ghastly eyes ; the dignity which comes from horror confronted.

"Take their course!" she said in a still, far-away voice. She paused a moment, and then went on in the same tone. "You think this is—inevitable?" The last word came with a strange ring.

"I think that any attempt at its prevention would be most undesirable," said Loring. "It might lead—of course, it is not very likely, but still it is possible—to private speculations on Master Julian's part!"

"Very well, then!" There was a curious, hard steadiness in her tone, as of one who perforce concedes a point to an adversary, and braces every nerve afresh to face the new situation thus created.

"That is like you!" exclaimed Loring admiringly. The tone of her voice had passed him by. "You will be glad, I know! Now, let me say again how awfully sorry I am to have distressed you, and then I'll go. You'll be glad to get rid of me!"

She did not seem to hear the words, but as his voice ceased, she turned her face slowly towards him with a vague, uncertain look upon it, as though her consciousness was struggling back to him, and the life he represented, across a great gulf. She looked at him a moment, and then that dignity, and a strange pathos which that groping look had possessed, gave way before a ghastly smile.

"I'm afraid I've been making myself most ridiculous!" she said, and there was a difficult, uncertain sprightliness about her weak voice. "So awfully sorry! I'm rather absurd about speculation. Old memories with which I needn't bore you! You'll look after my boy, then? Thanks!" She held out her hand as she spoke with a little affected gesture, but as he placed his hand in it her fingers closed with an icy clutch. "And now, do you know, I must send you away! Too bad, isn't it? But there is such a thing as dressing for dinner."

"Quite so," returned Loring gaily. "It is very good of you to have been bothered with me so long! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" she answered. "You'll report progress, of course?"

"Certainly! We're a pair of conspirators, are we not?"

When Mrs. Romaine came down to dinner that night her face was as haggard as though the interval intervening had held for her another three days' illness. But the hard determination in her eyes was more intense than ever.

## CHAPTER XXIX

It was not generally known among his acquaintances that Marston Loring had come back from Africa accompanied by a new friend; this new friend was not introduced by Loring at either of his clubs, and yet the two met at least once every day. He was a man named Alfred Ramsay; a small, insignificant-looking man, with sandy hair, which had turned—in streaks—the peculiar grey which such hair assumes, and small, dull eyes that never seemed to move in his head.

It was nearly three o'clock on the afternoon following that on which Loring had called on Mrs. Romaine, and he and his new friend were together in his chambers in the Temple. Mr. Ramsay had been there several times before, and he was sitting now in an arm-chair in the sunshine with an air of total want of interest in his surroundings, which was characteristic of him. Loring was walking up and down the room thoughtfully.

"Romaine!" observed Ramsay. "Not a particularly good name on the market! It belonged to a first-class swindler twenty years ago—William Romaine. This young gentleman is no connexion, I suppose?"

The remark broke a short silence, and Loring stopped in his walk and leant back against the mantelpiece as he answered.

"Yes," he said tersely, "he's his son. He has never been in his father's line, though—I doubt whether he knows anything about him, though it's an odd thing that he shouldn't! As to the name, why, it's an old story, and won't affect any one nowadays, I take it. The point is that he has this respectable capital, and is—exceedingly keen on increasing it."

There was a dryness in Loring's voice as he said the last words, which implied a great deal more than did his words. And it was apparently to that significance that the other man replied.

"A chip of the old block," said Ramsay musingly. "I wonder, now, how far it goes?"

The last words were spoken very slowly, and the dull eyes looked straight before them.

Loring looked down at him with a cynical smile just touching his lips. He knew considerably more about his new friend's character than he would have chosen to put into words, and he could guess, not inaccurately, what was passing in his mind at the moment. And the realisation of the shadowy possibilities with which Ramsay was occupied was no part of Marston Loring's designs. He made no direct answer.

"He should be here by this time," he said carelessly.

And as he spoke there was a sharp, cheery rap at the door; it opened quickly, and Julian Romaine appeared, very boyish, very good-looking, and with a curious, veiled keenness in his eyes.

"We were just expecting you," said Loring, greeting him with a friendly nod. "Let me introduce you to Mr. Alfred Ramsay."

Mr. Alfred Ramsay had risen to honour the introduction, turning his whole head slowly round as he looked at Julian, so that his eyes still gazed straight before them as they rested on the young man's face.

"Pleased to know you," he said indifferently.

"Very glad to make your acquaintance," responded Julian pleasantly. "I hope I'm not behind time?"

"Pretty fair," said Loring, laying his hand on the young man's shoulder with kindly patronage. "But Ramsay is a busy man, you know, so suppose we get to business at once. Ramsay," he continued, in a brisk, businesslike voice, as the three sat down about the table, "Romaine knows nothing of the affair whatever. I shall begin by running over the preliminaries with him. And, first of all," he went on, turning to Julian, "of course it is understood, Romaine, that we keep the matter to ourselves."

He spoke in a curt, off-hand manner, and as Julian made a quick gesture of acquiescence, he went on in the same businesslike tone.

"I don't know whether you know anything about the Welcome Diamond Mining Company?" he said. "Probably not. It was floated about this time last year, and the greater part of the business came into my hands. The shares were taken up all right, but—well, it didn't come to anything, and its affairs had something to do with my going out to the Cape. It was in connection with those same affairs that I and Ramsay met."

Julian had listened so far with a clouded countenance, and now, as Loring paused, he leant back in his chair with a movement of irrepressible disappointment.

"Oh!" he said shortly. "It's a mine, then?"

"There is a mine in connection with it," replied Loring imperturbably. "But you need not trouble yourself about the mine. That is only the figure-head, you understand. The affair itself is a matter of—arrangement. Look here, Romaine," he went on, as Julian leant suddenly forward across the table, "shares in the Welcome Diamond Mining Company are at this moment worth about five shillings each."

He paused. He had been leaning carelessly back in his chair, and now he moved, uncrossing his legs, and leaning one arm on the table.

"In a few days," he went on deliberately and significantly, "they will fall to two shillings." He paused again, with a slight, matter-of-course gesture. "That will be worked, of course," he said.

Julian nodded comprehension.

"Yes?" he said.

"At that price," continued Loring, "all the shares will be bought up by two or three men, in consequence of private information received from the Cape."

The last words came from Loring slowly and deliberately, and his eyes met Julian's significantly. A quick flash of understanding passed across Julian's face, and Loring continued easily:

"Reports to this effect will get about. The fact of the presence in London of a mining engineer from the vicinity of the Welcome will also get about. Perhaps he may allow himself to be interviewed, you know—nothing definite, of course. The shares will go up with a run."

He paused, and Julian threw himself back in his chair, tapping the table meditatively with one hand. His gaze was fixed upon the wall just over Loring's head, and there was a curious expression on his face which combined the keen matter-of-fact calculation of the habitual speculator with a certain unconscious gleam of hungry excitement which was eloquent of youth and inexperience. A minute or two passed, during which Mr. Ramsay's eyes rested indifferently on the young man's face, and then Julian spoke. His voice, also, in spite of his evident attempt at emulation of Loring's businesslike



nonchalance, was just touched by that youthful incapacity for holding keen personal interest in abeyance.

"And the private information received from the Cape will be supplied——?" he said interrogatively.

"Will be supplied by Ramsay," returned Loring.

The words were spoken with the slightest possible movement of the eyelids. Julian made a quick gesture of comprehension, and there was a moment's silence. Then Loring went on crisply, darting a quick glance at Julian's face in its calculating eagerness.

"In a private speculation of this kind, of course, it is a case of working together and share and share alike. Now, we propose—Ramsay and I, you understand—to make up a joint capital for the purchase of these shares. We are prepared to put into it fifteen thousand pounds between us, and we want another ten thousand at least. If you are prepared to put in that sum, or more, on the understanding that the profits—after each man has received back his original investment—are divided into three equal shares, we are willing to take you in with us."

Julian looked up at him quickly.

"Into three equal shares?" he said, with a stress on the adjective.

"Into three equal shares," returned Loring drily. "Capital is not the sole requisite in this affair, and the other factors are supplied by Ramsay and myself."

A dark flush mounted to Julian's forehead, and the avidity in his eyes developed.

"It's a large order, though," he said. "I don't quite see where I come in at that rate, after all."

Loring leant back in his chair and looked him full in the face.

"You can please yourself, of course," he said. "Take it or leave it. You will come in to the tune of something like thirty thousand. If you see your way to trebling your capital by any other means, do so. Lots of fellows will be glad to take your place with us."

Julian's eyes gleamed greedily, and he wavered obviously.

"Those are your final terms?" he said.

"Our final terms," said Loring concisely, looking at Ramsay, who nodded nonchalantly in confirmation of the words.

A silence ensued. Julian sat staring down at the table, his brows knit, evidently in close thought. At last he glanced up

suddenly at the two men who had been waiting carelessly for his decision.

"I call it rather rough," he said brusquely; "but—all right. If the thing looks all right when you've trotted it out, I accept."

He passed on instantly, with a brief, telling question, to the inner working of the scheme.

There is perhaps nothing by which self-revelation is more frankly and unconsciously made than through the means by which a man may be most easily roused to enthusiasm. Enthusiasm—a genuine quickening of his mental pulses, even—had been a condition of things practically unknown to the easy-going, commonplace Julian Romaine of a year before; but in the course of the last two months he had experienced it often. To hear of large sums of money, large profits, rapid returns on striking investments, touched him, instinctively, as a record of artistic achievements will touch an artist, as triumphs of research will touch an historian, as prodigies of physical prowess will touch an athlete. And as Loring answered him now, and went on with fuller and more technical detail, his face changed strikingly. His eyes brightened, and an eager, fascinated light came into them; he leant further forward, listening, commenting, questioning, with quick and always increasing excitement.

Half an hour passed, and still the three men sat about the table, talking in terse, businesslike fashion; three-quarters of an hour, an hour. At the end of that time, Julian, his face flushed and eager, his eyes glistening and sparkling, his hand absolutely shaking with excitement, was holding that hand out to Mr. Ramsay with a gesture which witnessed to the work of that hour, as volumes could not have done. As far as words went, he and Mr. Ramsay had hardly exchanged three sentences; it was the bond that lay behind the words that had drawn them together. Mr. Ramsay had spoken very little, indeed, but his silent presence had never for a moment seemed superfluous, or without a certain indefinite weight; and there was a dull approval in his slow eyes now as he turned them on the young man.

"We've settled so much, then," said Julian, in a quick, familiar way, "and we meet here on Thursday at two. Until then——" He turned to Loring, and stretched out his hand eagerly. "Thanks, old man," he said in a low, quick voice. "Thanks."

## CHAPTER XXX

MISS POMEROY's visit to Mrs. Romaine was postponed for a fortnight. At one time, indeed, it seemed not impossible that Mrs. Pomeroy's visit to her sister in Devonshire might be postponed indefinitely, and Mrs. Romaine was charmingly inconsolable over her prospective disappointment.

It was a delightful thing to have a girl in the house. Mrs. Romaine made the discovery and the statement as the very first evening of Miss Pomeroy's stay with her drew to a close. And certainly, the evening, signalised by a little dinner-party, had been pleasant enough to warrant satisfaction. Julian had been in the best possible spirits, elated apparently by the presence of his mother's visitor, at whose side he was to be found whenever his duties as host allowed such concentration of his attention. Miss Pomeroy herself had been a model of gentle amiability, and had looked more than usually bright and pretty. Loring, who had made one of the dinner guests, had also been at his best and most amusing. No conversation of any length had, of course, been possible between him and his hostess ; but a quick, low-toned word or two passed between them in the movement that ensued upon the reappearance of the men in the drawing-room after dinner.

And on the tone of that first evening, that of the fortnight into which Miss Pomeroy's stay lengthened itself was modelled. They were very dissipated, Mrs. Romaine asserted laughingly ; and she further declared that she had never enjoyed dissipation so much. Julian's hard-working impulses seemed to be in partial abeyance for the time being ; their demands on him, though peremptory when they did occur, did not prevent a great deal of attendance on his mother and her guest. Loring also seemed hardly to have settled back into his usual routine, and frequently made one of the party. His appearance on the scene, and the recognition of that compact between them which he never failed to make, either by a glance or a few quiet words, were never without a certain effect on Mrs. Romaine ; not on her spirits, for they never varied in their gaiety ; but on

a hard restlessness in her eyes, always lessened for the moment by that look or word from Loring.

The last day of June was also the last day of Mrs. Pomeroy's absence from London, and it was, moreover, the day fixed for a certain dance which was to stand out from all the other dances of the season. The givers of this dance were parvenus of the most pronounced type, and during the past three seasons they had paid their way into London society by spending fortunes on the entertainments they gave. This season they had issued cards of invitation, on which each guest was requested to wear mediæval Florentine dress, and it had been whispered abroad that thousands were to be spent in providing such a setting for these costumes as should eclipse anything hitherto seen. Fortunately for the projectors—and nobody knew better than they how absolutely impossible it was to calculate in such a matter—the idea caught society's fancy; it was taken up with the wild enthusiasm which alternates in the modern mind with blank indifference; and as every one with an invitation had spent some three weeks in ardent consideration of his or her dress for the occasion, that occasion had acquired a fictitious importance of a colossal nature, and was absolutely looked forward to as promising something quite unusual—and equally indefinite—in the way of amusement.

The whole thing had evidently been arranged, Mrs. Romaine declared gaily, to give a final touch of triumph to the end of Maud Pomeroy's visit to her. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon of the day in question, and she and Miss Pomeroy, with Julian as escort, were taking what she described as "a little turn" in the Park when she expressed this opinion. It was a perfect June afternoon, the Park was very full, and all three seemed to be exhilarated either by the sunshine, the movement, or the prospect of the evening. The fortnight's intimate association with her present companions had apparently had no effect whatever upon Miss Pomeroy's demure conventionality of manner, but her word was readier than usual, and her expression was brighter; Mrs. Romaine talked and laughed and kept the ball of chatter going; and about Julian's hilarity there was a touch of excitement which was a characteristic which had grown upon him markedly in the course of the last month. He turned upon his mother, protesting gaily.

"That's much too depressing a point of view," he said.

"It forces on us exactly what we want to forget—that it is the end. Now, I've made up my mind to cut the connection between to-night and both yesterday and to-morrow, and enjoy myself tremendously."

"And is 'cutting the connection'—it sounds as if something might blow up—an indispensable preliminary?" laughed Mrs. Romaine.

"Why, of course." He glanced at Miss Pomeroy as he spoke, and the colour deepened in her cheeks by just a shade as she turned to Mrs. Romaine and said, with one of her little smiles and a rather poor attempt at mock confidence:

"Mr. Romaine wants to forget the terrific anxiety which he has already suffered over that gorgeous dress of his, and the terrific bill from which he has still to suffer."

Julian's protestations were as eager and boyish in manner as they were delicate and skilful in matter, and Mrs. Romaine broke in upon them with a laughing apology and a request that Julian would tell the coachman to turn out into Piccadilly and drive to a house in Grosvenor Place. Julian gave the order, and added to it:

"You can pull up when you get out of the Park."

Mrs. Romaine took up the words instantly.

"Are you not coming with us, bad boy?" she said. "Come and help us pay one call, at any rate. We are going straight home after that to prepare ourselves for the triumphs of the evening by a little refreshing laziness, are we not, Maud?"

"I should like to immensely!" returned Julian ardently as Miss Pomeroy smiled a response. "But I'm afraid I must go down to the club. I promised to meet Loring there! Dinner at eight, I suppose?" he added as the carriage drew up and he jumped out.

He stepped back on the pavement, lifting his hat as the carriage drove off. Then he jumped into a hansom and gave the word to drive, not to the club but to the Temple. Arrived there he ran upstairs, the excitement about him gaining ground moment by moment, to Marston Loring's rooms. Loring was there alone. He was seated at the writing-table writing rapidly, his face keen and intent, and he suspended his work for an instant only as he glanced up on the opening of the door and nodded a greeting.

Julian's life for the last month had been lived at that high pressure which is only produced in a man by the con-

sciousness that he has burnt his ships. Every shilling that he had accumulated during the previous six months was invested in the scheme propounded to him a month ago by Marston Loring; and the history of his real life during the interval would have been a history of the stages through which that scheme had passed. The affairs of the Welcome Diamond Mining Company had followed precisely the course indicated by Loring during that first interview on the subject between Loring, Ramsay, and Julian. Shortly after that interview "Welcomes" had fallen to a nominal price; they had then been bought up according to arrangement. A slight rise had followed as a matter of course, followed by an interval of vacillation, and a slow succession of trifling advances, which had again been succeeded by a period of quiet.

So far the excitement with which every hour had been instinct for Julian had been the excitement of preparation solely; the ground had been tilled and the seed sown. And what that soil was in which he had sown his seed; what were the characteristics that were to prove so stimulating; it was not in him to consider. He was perfectly well aware of the nature of the transaction in which he was engaged; he had understood at the outset that the "private information received from the Cape" on which the shares were to be bought up was a "put up thing," as he would have expressed it, between Ramsay and Marston Loring; and the knowledge affected him not at all. That black thread in the warp of his character was running strong and deep now, and to such considerations his sensibilities were absolutely dormant.

"Well?" The monosyllable broke from him eager and impetuous, as though it contained the pent-up suspense and excitement of hours. He had come up rapidly to Loring's side, and the latter, without lifting his eyes, signed to an evening paper which lay on the table as he said briefly:

"All right!"

Julian's face turned quite white; he snatched up the paper and turned with breathless eagerness to the column devoted to the money market.

"Welcome Diamond Company Shares."

The blue eyes seemed to leap at the line and fasten on it with a hungry avidity pitiful to see, and he stood there gazing at it with glittering, fascinated eyes, with a curious stillness upon him from head to foot, as though all remembrance of his

actual surroundings, all thought even of Loring, had faded. Nearly five minutes had passed when Loring laid down his pen and leant back in his chair, turning a little that he might fix his eyes on Julian as he stood rather behind him.

"Pretty fair?" he said carelessly.

Julian lifted his eyes from the paper and turned his white face to Loring. He nodded as though the feelings of the moment were not to be put into speech, and then the slow, deep colour of excitement began to creep over his features.

"Have you seen Ramsay?" he said in a low, quick voice.

"Saw him this morning. He told me things were beginning to move. It was that paragraph yesterday that did it!"

"And what about keeping it up?" said Julian. "This is the ticklish moment, I take it! What's the next move?"

He had thrown himself into a chair as he spoke; his voice was jerking with eagerness, as though some of his excitement were finding expression. Loring looked at him for an instant before he answered. He was asking himself a question which had formulated itself in his mind more than once in the last month; namely, was it merely the influence of his blood which made young Romaine so keen a speculator; or was there something concealed in the background of his life which made money a desperate necessity with him?

"This is the next move," he answered, indicating the sheets of manuscript paper which lay before him. "This will be in one or two of the papers to-morrow, and if I'm not mistaken it will have a big effect!"

Julian stretched out his hand impulsively for the sheets and ran through them, now and then breaking into an eager comment; and as he finished he rose impetuously and began to pace excitedly up and down the room. His face was flushed now, and his eyes glowing.

"Yes, that ought to take us a long way!" he said. "And Ramsay backing it up all the while, of course? Loring, what do you make of it? An affair of—weeks?"

"An affair of two or three weeks, all told!" returned Loring nonchalantly. "The inside of a month ought to put the best part of thirty thousand into each of our pockets, my boy."

He rose as he spoke, and gathered together the sheets of



manuscript, but as he did so his quick ear caught a strange, sharp catch in Julian's breath. He fastened up the papers, and directed them with another of those slight smiles, and then turned again to the younger man. Julian was standing at the window staring almost stupidly out.

"I'm going to turn you out now!" said Loring lightly. "Coming down to the club with me?"

Julian turned round, but the words seemed to penetrate slowly to his consciousness.

"No!" he said at last. "No, thanks, old man. I—I'm going to get home."

He had to go to his own chambers first, it appeared, however, and Loring left him with a careless "All right! See you to-night, of course!"

The sunshine had left Julian's room, bright as it still was outside, and it looked, perhaps, the darker by contrast as he opened the door and shut himself in alone. He paused a moment, with his hand on the lock, and then walked aimlessly across to the writing-table and sat down. There was a pale, dazed look about him.

The line in the evening paper at which he had gazed with such devouring eyes had chronicled the first important rise of those shares on which his hopes were staked; chronicled, in fact, the beginning of the end. As he sat there alone, the words seemed to stand out all about him; to meet his eyes in every direction; and it was little wonder that, as he realised that the seed so eagerly sown had indeed broken ground at last, the perfect fruit seemed to be already in his hand, and he was dazed and intoxicated with anticipated triumph. He had the blood of a speculator and a gambler in his veins, and as he sprang up suddenly from his chair and began to pace up and down the room, it was the surging of the speculator's instinct that flushed his face and glittered in his eyes; the rioting of that money passion which, to the man who has never felt its fever, is the strangest and most repulsive—as it is the most abnormal—of all passions.

But little by little, without volition or even consciousness on his part, the current of his thoughts changed. Gradually that greedy, tumultuous contemplation of money as an end wavered, altered into a contemplation of money as a means, into a passing over of that means in the realisation of the end which it was to bring about. He was thinking of Clemence,



thinking of her in a tumult of excitement in which the goading of that two-edged dart of love and shame which quivered always in his better nature was absolutely unfelt ; thinking of her in a very hallucination of intoxicated triumph. He was living out with her a future life of triumphant satisfaction ; a life so utterly incompatible with the facts of the case, with all that had come and gone, and must still come and go, as to be a most pathetic imagining ; when the sound of a clock striking brought him suddenly to himself.

His first conscious thought was a certain vague surprise at his surroundings ; as far as externals went he had left Loring's room and had come to his own like a man walking in his sleep. Then he realised the nature of the sound that had roused him, and drew out his watch to see what hour it was that had struck. It was seven, and the fact, with the pressing necessity for his return home which it involved, gave a turn to the current of his thoughts by which, without changing their main character, they were blended in with the actual practicalities of the moment. He thought of his mother with a certain bitter triumph. "It's not for long," he said to himself, "not for long now." His mind ran on over the details of the evening before him ; the little dinner—"only ourselves," Mrs. Romayne had said gaily ; the artificialities that would pass between himself and his mother ; the effective flirtation which he would have to keep up with Miss Pomeroy—the flirtation which in the excitement of the past month he had carried on recklessly. And then with his hand on the door he stopped abruptly—stopped and stood quite still with a strange, defiant recklessness growing in his face. Whether it was some curious effect of the tumult through which he had passed, whether it originated in those jubilant visions of Clemence from which he had so recently awakened, it is not possible to say. But on that instant there had risen within him an impulse of fierce, overmastering repulsion against his mother, against Miss Pomeroy, against the part he had chosen to play. Almost before he had realised the sudden sense of overwhelming revolt and distaste which had seized him, its obverse was upon him. Clemence ! To see Clemence ! To speak to Clemence ! To satisfy the hungry longing which, for the moment, seemed absolutely to possess him !

Such a longing, in various forms and degrees, had shaken and torn him often before, but hitherto something—some in-

fluence from Clemence's own words, some jarring and throbbing of that better nature in himself—had held him back. But now, strung up and carried out of himself by his excitement, he was impervious to all considerations save that of his own overmastering craving. The end was very near now, he told himself. It was a question of a week or two only. He must see her ; she herself would see that it was only reasonable that he should see her !

His plans were laid in the passing of a few seconds. The only address Clemence had given him was that of the house of business where she worked—where she had worked when he met her first—his only chance of seeing her lay in meeting her when she left her work at night. He would not go home to dinner, he decided ; he would telegraph to his mother, and dine at a quiet restaurant. That would bring him, as he knew well enough, to the earliest hour at which the "hands," of whom Clemence made one, were likely to be released, and he would wait in the little by-street in which the "hands'" entrance was situated until she came.

He went out of the room with a quick, assured step, sent off his telegram—a brief "Detained. Inconsolable"—from an office in Fleet Street, and then, carefully avoiding the fashionable resorts, he walked to the restaurant he had mentally selected.

The little street which, for some scores of men and women, formed the picture evoked by a name which, for the shopping population of London, involved a mental vision of a busy thoroughfare and a considerable expanse of plate-glass windows, ran parallel to that thoroughfare, divided from it only by a long block of buildings ; and bearing in mind the slight nature of the division between the two, the contrast presented was almost startling. The little street was a thoroughfare inasmuch as it led from one side-street to another ; but these streets were very little frequented, and the connecting link between them was a short cut to nowhere. It represented simply so many back entrances to places of business, and these being to a great extent monopolised by a single firm, the comings and goings at stated times of the hands employed by that firm was often the only movement that broke the quiet from morning until night. In the intervals between these comings and goings there brooded over the street such a silence and stillness as seemed strangely incompatible with the thought of all the labour

and effort that it held ; with the hard day's work towards which those coming footsteps in the morning were bent ; with the hard day's work which lay behind those departing footsteps in the evening. The street itself had a squalid, neglected look, too, as though life and activity had passed it by.

The day's work was not over yet, though the evening light was making long shadows, and the setting sun was turning the upper windows of the opposite houses into ruddy fire ; the street was absolutely silent and deserted when Julian turned quickly into it. He pulled up and surveyed his surroundings with a rapid, comprehensive glance.

It was too early yet. He looked at his watch and told himself so with somewhat over-elaborated carelessness, and took out his cigarette-case. He lighted a cigarette ; and pacing slowly up and down the pavement on the opposite side of the street to that on which he expected Clemence to emerge, he began to reckon with himself the chances for and against her speedy or tardy appearance.

But such practical, matter-of-fact considerations involved a deliberate mental action on his part, and having gone through it, urged by that curious instinct under which intense excitement always desires to assert itself as absolute calm and sanity, he gradually let himself slip away again from the practical and the actual, and gave himself up to the tide of his exhilarated imaginings.

There is nothing more exciting, nothing that sooner quickens the mental pulses into a very fever of confusion, than the sudden indulgence of an impulse long resisted. The hour that had passed since the idea, of which his presence in that quiet little street was the outcome, had flashed into Julian's mind and dominated it, had carried him as completely out of himself, and out of touch with realities, as is a man under the influence of absinthe. As a man so exhilarated will be impervious to a considerable amount of physical pain, so Julian was for the time being absolutely unconscious of anything painful or shameful in his position. The circumstances under which he had parted from Clemence ; all the bitter pain and longing under which he had smarted and writhed with such fierce rebellion ; the attitude towards himself which his conduct might only too justly have created in his wife ; were absolutely obliterated from his mind. He was waiting now—husband, master, altogether the superior ; triumphant, successful, self-assured—for

his mistaken but doubtless submissive wife ; conscious, and rather pleased with the consciousness, that he loved her in spite of her faults.

One quarter after another chimed out from a neighbouring clock. He had been waiting nearly an hour, oblivious, in his elation, of tedium or weariness ; oblivious of the claim upon him of the life of Queen Anne Street as though it had no existence for him. The slight feeling of impatience with which he realised that the fourth quarter was chiming was entirely unconnected with such externals ; and it was an eloquent testimony to his mental attitude that it took the form of a faint sense of irritation with Clemence for delaying so long. A vague feeling of lordly disapproval of her conduct stirred in him, as he paused at the top of the street and glanced across at the still fast-closed doors. He was just looking dubiously at his cigarette-case when the click of a latch, instantly followed by the sound of girls' voices, made him start violently. He thrust the case hastily into his pocket and walked quickly down the street, until he was standing just opposite the door from which a little stream of girls and women was pouring forth.

Several figures had already detached themselves from the stream and were moving rapidly away, either singly or in pairs : but one quick glance told him that neither of these was Clemence, and he fixed his eyes with eager confidence on the doorway through which she had still to pass. His face was flushed with intense excitement. On came the stream, girls and women following one another in unbroken succession ; pretty girls, plain girls, shabby girls, smart girls, some arm in arm, some laughing and talking in loud-voiced groups ; several of these groups noticed his waiting figure and commented upon it in giggling whispers, turning back as they passed down the street to look at it again, but Julian only saw that none of these was Clemence. The stream was beginning to dwindle ; stragglers followed one another now at irregular intervals ; the two girls who had been the last to appear had nearly reached the end of the street, and still Julian's eyes were riveted on the open doorway.

The girls turned the corner, and down the dim passage into which he was looking there came slowly another figure quite alone. Before it had emerged into the light Julian was across the road, as though that one great throb with which his heart leapt up to meet her had impelled him physically, and as

Clemence passed out into the soft dusk of the June evening he spoke her name, eagerly at first, then with a strange break in his voice :

"Clemence ! Clemence !"

At the first sound of his voice—evidently the first sign to her that he was near—a low, indescribable cry broke from Clemence ; she turned towards him trembling, swaying as she stood, and Julian caught her in his arms lest she should fall.

"You've come !" she cried, and before the exquisite rapture and relief of her faint, quivering voice, with all that it implied of suffering past, a harder man than Julian might have melted. "My dear, my dear, I knew you'd come ! I knew ! I knew !"

But that pathetic voice had not been needed. The first sight of her face as she turned it upon him with that wonderful irradiation of joy upon it, had shrivelled into nothingness all the exultation, all the triumph and self-satisfaction of the past few hours, and Julian held her in his arms, his trance over, self-convicted, self-condemned ; his whole consciousness absorbed in that heavy, throbbing agony of his better nature which had leapt into sudden relentless life. What it was that so penetrated him he could not have defined. Where and in what proportion old influence revived, touched, and was blended with a heart-piercing sense of the change in her, he could not have said ; he did not even know that these were indeed the powers that had struck him. The change in her, even as he gazed down at her face with agonised, remorseful eyes, as it rested for one moment on his shoulder, he rather felt than traced and understood.

That change was very great. Those past six months had dealt heavily with that thin, white face, and the marks of their passing were plain to see, even in that moment of absolute transfiguration. Every curve, every suggestion of girlishness seemed to have been worn away ; worn away by those cruel twin refiners, never so pitiless as when they work together—physical suffering and mental distress. The outline of her features had lost some of its beauty in that intense accentuation ; the colourless lips were slightly drawn, and under the sunken eyes were heavy shadows. But no remembrance of the physical loveliness which she had lost could stand for an instant before the spiritual loveliness which she had gained. It was as

though those twin refiners, before whom nothing earthly or external can stand and flourish, had strengthened that which lay behind the externals with which they had dealt so ruthlessly. The eyes, so indescribably beautiful as they looked now into Julian's, had been beautiful even in that moment before she realised his presence ; beautiful in their heaviness as no brightness, as no common happiness could have made them ; beautiful with the perfect patience and dignity of accepted suffering. The tired mouth had been beautiful in its repose, as it was beautiful now in its tremulous rapture ; beautiful in its quiet constancy and self-abnegation.

She let herself rest for a moment in his arms ; clinging to him with something in her touch which he had never felt before ; looking up into his face as her head lay back against his shoulder with a strange, tremulous, tender light quivering on every feature, shaken from head to foot by little tremulous, tearless sobs—the sobs of utter relief and peace. Then she disengaged herself gently, and drew herself away, something of that first ecstasy dying out of her face to leave it soft and happy beyond all words. That strange light still shone in her eyes, and, as she moved, one thin hand retained its clinging hold on his arm, as though some instinct of dependence influenced her involuntarily. She was dressed, not as the other girls had been, in a light summer jacket, but in a long cloak, and as she drew it about her with the other hand, the softest touch of colour came into her white cheek.

“My dear !” she said softly. “My dear !”

And Julian whispered hoarsely as he had whispered again and again :

“Clemmie ! Clemmie !”

He made no attempt to take her in his arms again. Even the gesture with which he laid his hand upon those clinging fingers on his sleeve was diffident and almost tremulous ; tender and reverent as no gesture of his had ever been in all his life before. He could find no words. In her presence everything—all the triumph, all that had seemed to him the necessities and realities of life—seemed to have fallen away from him. He was nothing. He had nothing ! He could say nothing to her.

There was a silence ; silence which for Clemence as her fingers closed round his, and that soft colour came and went in her cheeks, breathed an ineffable content ; silence which for

Julian held the blackest depths of self-revelation and self-contempt. It was broken at last by Clemence.

"Is it done, dear?" she said gently.

Julian's hand turned cold in hers, and his eyes fell away from her face.

"Not—not yet, Clemmie!" he faltered wretchedly. "I—I came to tell you—to tell you that——"

"That you are going to do it? That you are going to do it? My dear, my dear, you mean that? Oh, you mean that, don't you?"

She had not raised her voice or changed her pose, but that touch upon his arm had become a close, convulsive grip, and even the clutch of the worn, blanched hand upon her cloak witnessed to the agony of supplication with which every nerve was strained and quivering. Her low voice thrilled and vibrated with it; her white face, to which his first words had brought a look of heart-sick disappointment, was an embodied prayer. He could not answer on the instant; it cut him like a lash; and she went on rapidly, her low, beseeching voice breaking and trembling with the intense feeling that flickered on her face like a light.

"Julian, for my sake, for your wife's sake, dear! I love you so! I—I need you so! Don't part us any longer! If it was for your good, if it was to make you happy, there's nothing I would not face, and face cheerfully—ah, you know that, don't you? But you're doing wrong, and I think of it always, and it makes the loneliness so that I can't bear it. Oh, I can't bear it!"

She broke suddenly into low shuddering sobs and tears, and her head fell forward helplessly on to his breast, though she still kept her convulsive hold upon his arm. He put his other arm round her and drew her towards him, and as he did so he seemed to realise with a kind of double consciousness the course he would take and its utter contemptibility.

"Don't, Clemmie dear! Don't! don't!" he said in a broken, uneven voice. "It's all right, dear! I'm going to do it! I came to tell you so! It's all right!"

"You're going to—tell her?"

"I am, Clemence! I promise you I am! Only—only not for a week or two. There's—there's something I must wait for!"

"But you are going to? You are? You are?"

"On my—on my soul, yes, Clemence!"

There was a moment's silence, broken only by her low, tremulous sobs; then these too died away. At last, with a long sighing breath, she raised herself and looked into his pale, miserable face, with her own quiet and exhausted.

"Must you wait?" she said, with an indescribable accent on the first bitter word. "Must you?"

"I—I must, dear!" he said desperately, his eyes trying wretchedly to avoid hers. "It shan't be long, I promise you; but I must wait just a little longer!"

She paused a moment, still looking into his face. Then, with a sudden light in her eyes, she made a slight movement as though she would have bent his head down that she might murmur in his ear. She stopped herself, however, and there settled down upon her face a look of unutterable sadness. By Julian, in his helpless misery of self-contempt, the gesture had passed utterly unheeded.

"Don't let it be much longer, dear!" she said. "Good night!"

Julian caught at the last word as though it gave him some sort of chance of restoring his writhing self-respect.

"Good night!" he echoed. "Not yet, Clemence! I'm going to see you home, of course!"

But Clemence shook her head.

"No!" she said steadfastly, "no, dear!"

Something in her tone, something in the touch she laid upon him, took from him all power of self-assertion, all power of resistance to her will. She drew his head towards her now, kissed him softly on the forehead, and then turned and went away down the street, leaving him alone.



## CHAPTER XXXI

**"ROMAYNE, at last! By Jove, old man, we thought you were going to throw us over!"**

The voice, a young man's voice, struck out, as it were, from an indescribable medley of incongruous sound. The background was formed by the lightest and most melodious dance music, produced solely from stringed instruments; lutes and guitars seemed to predominate, and the result had a character and rhythm of its own which was essentially graceful, picturesque, and Italian; against the background, a high-pitched discord compounded of every imaginable key, there clashed a very Babel of tongues—the eminently unmusical voice of modern society, with all its faults of modulation and pronunciation, blended into a whole full of a character absolutely incompatible with the old-time southern harmonies with which it mingled.

The speaker's figure, as he stopped suddenly in a hurried passage across the room, stood out from a blaze of colour, light, and gorgeousness of every description, which fell without pause or cessation into ever fresh combination, as the beautifully dressed crowd moved to and fro in its magnificent setting. And the spectacle presented to the eye was as curiously jarring, as strikingly suggestive of the ludicrous inconsistencies of dreamland, as were the sounds that saluted the ear. There was hardly a man or woman to be seen whose dress was not as faithful a copy of the costume prevalent among the Florentine nobles under the magnificent rule of the Medici as time and money could make it. There was not a false note in the surroundings; money had been poured out like water in order that a perfect reproduction of an old Florentine palace might be achieved; and far as art could go nothing was left to be desired. The fault lay with nature. The old Italians doubtless had their own mannerisms, possibly their own vulgarities, of carriage, gesture, and general demeanour; but theirs were not the mannerisms and vulgarities of modern "smart" society.

The young man who had greeted Julian exemplified in his own person all the preposterous incongruity of the whole. His dress was a marvel of correctness to the minutest detail. Its wearer's face was of the heavy, inanimate bull-dog type; his movement as he shook hands with Julian was an exaggerated specimen of the approved affectation of the moment; his speech was clipped and drawled after the most approved model among "mashers." He was the son of the house, and there was a kind of slow excitement about his manner, struggling with a nonchalant carelessness which he evidently wished to present to the world as his mental attitude of the moment. There was a note of excitement also in the medley of voices about him. The "affair" was "a huge go"—as the young man himself would have expressed it. And neither he nor any one of his father's guests was troubled for one instant by any sense of the ludicrousness of the effect produced.

Julian had that instant entered the room and had paused on the threshold. There is perhaps no type of costume more picturesque in its magnificence than that of the Italian noble of the Middle Ages—this is perhaps the reason why it has been so extensively vulgarised—and Julian's dress was an admirable specimen of its kind, rich, graceful, and becoming. There was a subtle difference between his bearing and that of his host, though Julian's demeanour, too, was modern to the finest shade. He wore the dress well, with none of the other man's awkwardness, but on the contrary with an absolute ease and unconsciousness which implied a certain excited tension of nerve. His face was colourless and very hard; but upon the hardness there was a mask of animation and gaiety which was all-sufficient for the present occasion.

"I'm awfully sorry, dear boy!" he said now, lightly and eagerly, and with an exaggerated gesture of deprecation. "It's horribly late, I know! Give you my word I couldn't help it! By Jove, what a magnificent thing you've made of this!"

The other glanced round with a satisfaction which he tried in vain to repress.

"Not so bad, is it?" he said carelessly. "Only these fellows are such fools, even the best of them; they always blunder if they can." With this wholesale condemnation of the workmen among whom, some fifty years ago, his grandfather might have been found, he screwed his eyeglass into

his eye, serenely unconscious of the comic effect produced, for the better contemplation of a pretty girl at the farther end of the room. "Lady Pamela looks awfully fit, doesn't she?" he observed parenthetically; continuing almost in the same breath: "The gardens are the best part, seems to me. Awfully like the real thing, don't you know!"

Julian's only direct answer was an expressive gesture of appreciation and apology.

"Awfully well done!" he said. "Excuse me, dear boy, I see my mother, and she'll want to know why I've not turned up before. I must go and explain."

His companion laughed; the laugh was rather derisive, and the glance he cast on Julian through his eyeglass was stupidly inquisitive and incredulous.

"What a fellow you are, Romaine!" he said. "They ought to put you in a glass case and label you the model son."

Another gay, expressive gesture from Julian.

"Why not?" he said lightly. "We're a model pair, you know."

And the next moment he was threading his way quickly across the room. A sudden movement of the crowd had shown him his mother's figure, and he had realised instinctively that she had seen him. He came up to her with a manner about which there was something indescribably reckless, and made her a low bow of gay and abject apology.

"I beg ten thousand million pardons!" he said. "Language fails to express my feelings."

Mrs. Romaine's dress was not a success—that is to say, it was perfect in itself, and failed only as a setting for its wearer; to deprive her appearance of any possibility of "chic" or "dash" was to deprive it of all its brilliancy. But no unsuitability of colouring or cut in her gown could have been responsible for the look which underlay her smile, as she turned to Julian now and struck a little attitude of mock implacability, with a light, high-pitched laugh.

"Then the conversation must be carried on in dumb show," she said, "for language also fails to express my feelings, sir. What have you to say for yourself?"

Her voice, for all its gaiety, was thin and strained.

"Please, nothing," was the mock-humility answer. "I met a fellow, and he beguiled me. He was just off to America."

He was standing with his hands folded and his eyes cast

down, and he did not see—he would not have understood if he had seen—the strange flash in those hard, blue eyes—such a flash as might leap up in the eyes of a woman in the silent endurance of a swift stab of pain.

“A very poor excuse,” declared Mrs. Romaine gaily. “No, I don’t think I shall forgive you yet. Such unscrupulous desertion must be visited as it deserves. Don’t you think so?”

Lord Garstin had come up to them, and the question was addressed to him with a light laugh as she gave him her hand. He nodded pleasantly to Julian as he answered:

“Who has deserted? Not this boy of yours, eh?”

Mrs. Romaine laughed again, and pushed Julian playfully with her fan.

“Oh, I forgot! You don’t know his wickedness, of course! Take me away from him, Lord Garstin, do, and I’ll confide in you. Gorgeous affair this, isn’t it? I wonder what it cost?”

Lord Garstin looked round with a rather lofty smile. There were times when it pleased him to pose as an isolated representative of a bygone age by the traditions of which, in matters of taste and breeding, the present age was utterly condemned.

“Rather too gorgeous to please an old man,” he said now with a fine reserve. “These dear good people would be more to my taste, do you know, if they had a little less money. Have you been outside, by-the-bye? It’s really not badly done.”

Mrs. Romaine turned away with him, laughing and nodding to Julian, and then she stopped and went towards her son again, touching his shoulder lightly.

“Every one isn’t so stony-hearted as I am, bad boy,” she whispered gaily. “Somebody has actually kept you some dances, I believe, if you apologise properly. Look, there she is.”

She made a little gesture with her fan towards the entrance to the dancing-room, from which Maud Pomeroy was just emerging, looking like a picture in a white dress of the simplest form, her long hair loose on her shoulders, and crowned with a wreath of flowers. The dance music had stopped, and the music which still filled the air came from the garden. With that hard recklessness growing stronger on his

face, Julian made a slight, graceful gesture towards his mother as though he would have kissed his hand to her in gratitude, turned away, and moved rapidly over to Miss Pomeroy.

More than three hours had gone by since Julian had found himself standing alone gazing stupidly in the direction in which Clemence had disappeared, and how the first two of those hours had passed he hardly knew. He had turned abruptly away and left the little street, to walk mechanically on and on, struggling blindly in a black abyss of self-contempt, in which his love lived only as additional torture.

He had emerged gradually from that abyss, or rather his sense of its surrounding blackness had faded by degrees, as all such acute sensations must. And so completely had that blackness walled him in, and deadened all his outward perceptions, that it was only little by little, and with a dull sense of surprise, that his material surroundings dawned on him again, and he realised that he was standing looking down into the river from the Thames Embankment. His consciousness had come back to that life and world which he believed to constitute the only practical realities ; but it had brought with it that which turned all its environment to bitterness and gall. As he stood leaning on the parapet, staring sullenly down, counting the reflection of the lamps in the dark water beneath him in the moody vacancy of reaction, the necessities of his life began to surround him once more ; he saw them all as they were, sordid and base, and yet he neither saw nor attempted to see any possibility of self-extraction. The sound of Big Ben as it struck eleven had brought back to his mind the claims upon him of that particular evening.

At eleven o'clock the carriage had been ordered to take Mrs. Romaine and her party to the dance, and a grim, cynical smile touched his set, white lips as he thought of his mother. He had broken loose, temporarily, he told himself bitterly. He must take up his part again and play the farce out.

That he should throw himself into the task with a wild oblivion of all proportion and limitation, was the inevitable result of all that had gone before ; of all the perception and all the blindness with which he was racked and baffled.

Miss Pomeroy saw him coming, and turning her face away, she produced a pretty, well-turned comment on the arrangement of the rooms for the benefit of her cavalier. The next instant Julian stood beside her.

"Don't turn your back on me," he implored gaily. "No fellow ever had such hard luck as I've had to-night. Be a great deal kinder to me than I seem to deserve, and forgive me. Please!"

Miss Pomeroy turned her head and looked at him with a serene calm on her pretty face, which seemed to relegate him to a place among inferior objects entirely indifferent to her. Her voice was perhaps a little too indifferent.

"Oh, Mr. Romaine!" she said. "You've actually appeared!"

"I have," he said. "At last! There's a poor fellow I've seen a good deal of—not one of the regular set, you know, but a thoroughly unlucky chap, always in the wars. He's just off to try his luck on the other side of the world, and I met him this evening most awfully blue and lonely—he hasn't a friend in the world. Of course I had to try and cheer him up a bit, and—there, I couldn't leave him, don't you know. I packed him into the mail train at last, and bolted here as fast as wheels could bring me."

Something of the blank serenity of Miss Pomeroy's face gave way. She lifted the feather fan that hung at her girdle and began to ruffle the feathers lightly against her other hand with lowered eyelids.

"I don't think I should have troubled to hurry as it was so late!" she said, and there was a touch of reproach and resentment in her voice. Her cavalier had drifted away by this time, and in the midst of the constantly moving stream of people she and Julian were practically alone. Julian answered her quickly with eager significance.

"You would—in my place!" he said. "You would if you had had the hope of even one of the dances to which you had been looking forward—well, I won't say how, or for how long. Was it altogether a vain hope? Am I quite too late?"

"You are very late!" was the answer; but the tone was distant and indifferent no longer; and as the sound of the violins rose softly and invitingly once more from the other room a quick question from Julian received a soft affirmative in reply, and he led her triumphantly towards the music.

The room was not too full. The garden, the supper, the "show"—as the guests called it amongst themselves—as a whole, prevented any overcrowding in the dancing-room. But

dancing among such cunningly arranged accessories was by no means a commonplace business. The unfamiliar picturesqueness of the room, with its softly scented air, the wonderful effects of colour and light, and above all a certain wild passion and sweetness about the music, was not wholly without effect even on the jaded, torpid receptivity of men and women of the world.

Even Miss Pomeroy's calm was apparently not wholly proof against the intoxication ; by the time the music died away there was a bright colour on her cheeks, and a bright light in her eyes. On Julian the atmosphere and the music had had much the same effect as an excessive quantity of champagne might have had. His pale face had flushed hotly, and his eyes were glittering with excitement.

He had become aware during their last turn round the room that his mother was standing in the doorway watching them, this time with Loring in attendance ; and with a feverish flash of callous defiance he so guided their movements that they came to a standstill finally close before her.

"Congratulate us!" he cried gaily, "we've broken the record! And congratulate me individually, for I've had the most awfully glorious dance of my life! Hullo, Loring, old man!"

"I'll congratulate you both," was Mrs. Romaine's ready answer, as Loring nodded. "You both look as if you had had a good time. Wonderful show, isn't it? It isn't possible to say what it must have cost. Something appalling, of course. Maud, dear, have you come across Claudia Eden? Over there, don't you see? Isn't it outrageous?"

"By Jove!" ejaculated Julian lightly, looking in the direction indicated by a slight movement of his mother's fan, as Miss Pomeroy uttered an exclamation of pretty amazement. Conspicuous against all the magnificence about her was a girl in a kind of burlesque of an Italian *contadina* dress of the period, with very short skirts, very low-cut bodice, very exaggerated head-dress. She was talking and laughing with a little crowd of men ; her manner was as pronounced and as unrefined as her dress ; but there was about her that absolutely unconscious and impenetrable self-possession and self-assurance which stamped her as being by birth that which she was certainly not in appearance—a lady, and a very highly born lady.

"She would do anything to make a sensation," murmured Miss Pomeroy, contemplating her critically.

"But have you two seen the gardens?" went on Mrs. Romaine gaily. "No? Then you must simply go instantly. The most marvellous thing I ever saw! Go along at once."

With a laugh Julian turned to Miss Pomeroy. "We must do as we are bidden, of course," he said. "Will it bore you frightfully?"

A smile and the slightest possible shrug of the shoulders constituted Miss Pomeroy's answer, and they were turning away together, followed by a keen glance from Loring, when the girl in the contadina dress, passing close to them with her somewhat noisy court, intercepted their passing.

"Evening, Maud," she said in a loud, good-natured voice, which might have been delicate and high-bred if fashion had not demanded other characteristics. "Hullo, Mr. Romaine! Like my frock, Maud?"

Miss Pomeroy murmured something gracefully inaudible, and Mrs. Romaine said, with a smile:

"Most original, Lady Claudia."

A restless gleam had come into Mrs. Romaine's eyes at the momentary pause, but there was a certain satisfaction, too, in her smile as the two girls stood face to face. Maud Pomeroy certainly never appeared to greater advantage than in contrast with a pronounced type of the modern society girl. The juxtaposition seemed to bring into strong relief everything about her appearance and demeanour which was dainty, gentle, and sweet, and to throw into shade all her more negative charm. Her voice, now, perfectly modulated and absolutely even, made the other girl seem "quite too vulgar," as Mrs. Romaine said to herself. She echoed Mrs. Romaine's words, and added:

"How came you to think of it?"

"I thought it would score," returned the other, with a laugh. "I can't stand these people, don't you know! I thought of getting a whole lot of us to do it; it would have been no end of a joke! Then I thought that I'd keep it to myself. Ta-ta!"

And with a rough, ungraceful gesture of farewell she passed on.

"Lady Claudia's hostess would strangle her, cheerfully, with her own hands," remarked Loring placidly.



Mrs. Romaine laughed.

"So would a great many other people," she said. "But come, you two be off and see these gardens."

Julian and Miss Pomeroy moved away as if with one consent, and Mrs. Romaine watched them as they went with such a strange intentness in her face, that she looked for the moment as though her consciousness were actually leaving her to follow the two on whom her eyes were fixed.

The idea of the whole entertainment had originated, so people said, in the fact that its giver had spent enormous sums of money in the course of the past three years on the transformation of his grounds into an Italian garden, and the scene from the terrace, as Julian and Miss Pomeroy stepped out on to it, was indeed extraordinarily effective. There was no moon, and thousands of coloured lamps, skilfully disposed, shed a picturesque, uncertain light, under which the long ilex-shaded alleys, the box hedges, the fountains, and the statues produced an illusion which was almost perfect.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Julian in the same strained, excited voice. "Capital, isn't it? It must be almost worth while to live away here in the wilds of Fulham to have a place capable of being turned into a show like this. Don't you think so?"

Miss Pomeroy did not answer immediately. Apparently, the excitement created by their dance had rather strengthened than diminished during the interval, and she was playing almost nervously with her fan. Miss Pomeroy was not a nervous person as a rule.

"I don't know," she said vaguely. "Yes, it's very pretty, isn't it? But I don't think I should much care to have a big place, do you know. I don't think places make much difference."

Her voice was low, and very prettily modulated, and Julian threw a quick sideways glance at her. Except for a flush, and a certain look in her eyes which he could not see, her face was as demure and placid as ever.

"Don't you?" he said. "You are right, of course, and I am wrong. I can imagine circumstances under which all this would be a howling wilderness to me."

He looked at her very differently this time, with his eyes recklessly eloquent. She dropped her own eyes quickly, and said softly:

"Can you?"

They had strolled down the steps as they talked, and at their right hand a picturesque little alley, with a vista of fountain and statue against a grove of ilex-trees, led away from the more open space in front of the house. Down this alley, secluded and apparently deserted, Miss Pomeroy turned, as if unconsciously, before she spoke again. Julian followed her lead with an ugly smile on his face.

Then she said in the same pretty, low voice :

"Tell me what circumstances?"

Julian laughed, and his laugh might well have been construed as a sign of extreme nervousness and agitation.

"I think not!" he said. "I might make you angry."

"You would not make me angry!"

They came to the end of the alley as she spoke; it opened out on a quaint little corner containing a fish-pond surrounded by a stone balustrade, the fountain in the middle sparkling and dancing in the gleam of the artificial moonlight which had been arranged here and there about the grounds to give the finishing touch to sundry "bits." Into this moonlight Maud Pomeroy stepped, and stood leaning gracefully over the balustrade gazing down into the water, as she said in a voice just low and hesitating enough to be perfectly distinct :

"Mr. Romayne, will you tell me—did you think me very angry when you came to-night?"

"I hope you are not angry now, at least!" was the answer, spoken with eager anxiety. "But I would rather think you had been angry than believe that you were quite indifferent as to whether I came or not!"

"I am not—indifferent!" Maud Pomeroy paused. There was no colour at all in her cheeks now, and her lips were drawn together in a hard, thin line such as no one had ever seen on her face before. There was a dead silence. A sudden stillness had come over Julian's figure as he stood also leaning against the balustrade, but with his back to the water. His hand was clenched fiercely against the stone.

"I have no right to be angry with you," Maud Pomeroy went on; her voice was thin and hard as if its steadiness was the result of deliberate effort. "I have no rights at all. If I had——" She let her voice die away again with deliberate intention.

The silence that followed had something ghastly in it. At

last, with his face as white as death, and keeping his eyes fixed steadily before him, Julian moved.

"You will catch cold, I'm afraid!" he said a little hoarsely. "Shall we go in?"

Without a single word Miss Pomeroy moved also and retraced her steps up the alley. For one moment, and for one moment only, her face was no longer that of a gentle and amiable girl, but of a spiteful and vindictive woman.

## CHAPTER XXXII

MORE than one of the people who had talked to Mrs. Romaine in the interval had been vaguely aware of a certain uncontrollable preoccupation behind her manner; though the intense, suppressed excitement in which that preoccupation originated passed undetected. Her restless eyes fastened upon Miss Pomeroy and Julian on the very instant of their reappearance in the room, and as they came towards her that excitement leapt up suddenly and lit up her whole face with a wild flash of hope and anticipation. They drew nearer and it died down again even more suddenly than it had sprung up; and in its passing it seemed to have aged her face curiously, and to have left upon it a stamp of heart-sick disappointment, touched with a creeping anxiety. Miss Pomeroy was pale, and her usual still placidity seemed to be accentuated into absolute stupidity. Julian's face was quite colourless, and beneath the travesty of his usual manner which he assumed in speaking to his mother, there was an indefinable expression which made him look ten years older and twenty years harder and more bitter.

Scruples on his part as to crushing their dress prevented his going home with them. He would follow in a hansom, he said. But before he arrived Miss Pomeroy had said good night to Mrs. Romaine with a neatly-turned and quite meaningless expression of the pleasure the evening had given her, and had retired to her room. Mrs. Romaine, looking haggard and worn, lingered until Julian came in, and went out to meet him.

"Good night, mother," he said, and went straight upstairs without pausing.

It was many, many years since he had left her at night without a kiss; and as Mrs. Romaine went slowly up to her room through the silent house, she stumbled once or twice as though her wide, dry eyes hardly saw the stairs before her.

That creeping anxiety had gained ground greatly in her face the next morning when she came down at about half-past ten, to learn from the servant that "Mr. Julian" had already

breakfasted and had gone to the Temple. Even more pathetic than the anxiety itself was the courage that battled against it; that strove so hard to become confidence as she led—and, indeed, sustained—the conversation, as she and Miss Pomeroy, who was late in putting in an appearance, breakfasted together. She talked lightly and gaily of Julian's defection on this, their visitor's last morning; she deplored the fact that it was indeed the last morning, talking of various half-formed schemes for such constant meetings as would be practically a continuance of the intimate association of the past fortnight. But of response she obtained little or none. An access of conventionality, demureness, and insipidity seemed to be inspiring Miss Pomeroy; an access characterised by a certain absolute obstinacy of colorlessness. She had no opinions, no sentiments of any sort or kind to offer; her expressions of regret at leaving were as unmeaning as they were correct. Mrs. Romaine's plans seemed to wither under her little non-committal smile and comment; and she took her irreproachable leave an hour later with a vaguely expressed hope that they might meet "somewhere," and apparently without hearing Mrs. Romaine's parting allusion to Julian.

Each one of the days that followed seemed to leave upon Mrs. Romaine's face some such effect as might have been produced upon a marble counterpart of that face by the delicate application of a sharp modelling tool. Every feature became a little sharper; every line a little deeper, a little harder. Nobody noticed the fact, and nobody could have traced it to its source had they done so. But there were times when she was alone; times when that chisel under which she grew more haggard every day revealed itself as heart-sick, gnawing anxiety.

For three or four days Miss Pomeroy's hope that they might meet "somewhere" remained unfulfilled; and Mrs. Romaine made little jokes at what she assumed to be Julian's disconsolate condition; jokes which, taken in conjunction with the look in her eyes as she spoke them, were almost ghastly. Then the meeting took place at a party from which, as it appeared, Miss Pomeroy and her mother were just departing; so that a few words of greeting on either side was all that passed.

Mrs. Pomeroy and her daughter called on Mrs. Romaine a day or two later. It was Mrs. Romaine's "day," of course; the room was very full, and as Mrs. Pomeroy said, with an

expression as near apprehension as was compatible with her placidity in the eyes which kept turning to her daughter's demure face: "Wednesday is such a popular day, and we've really dozens of calls to pay, haven't we, Maud?" Consequently they stayed barely ten minutes, and exchanged half-a-dozen sentences with their hostess. But short and formal as the call was, it was supplemented by no more intimate intercourse. They met, of course, nearly every day. That is to say, Mrs. Romaine, as she went about indefatigably from party to party, caught constant glimpses of Miss Pomeroy and her mother just arriving as she left, just leaving as she arrived, just going to supper, to tea, to fulfil some social duty or other which made it impossible that more than a word or two should pass. When Mrs. Romaine pressed Miss Pomeroy, with sprightly reproaches, to come and see her, she was met invariably with unmeaning smiles, and vague words about engagements, which, gentle as they sounded, proved as little capable of manipulation as a stone. Once or twice after such a meeting, Mrs. Romaine's jokes at Julian's expense, as she told him of them airily afterwards—Julian and Miss Pomeroy never seemed to meet now—took the form of hints and innuendoes as to whether he was not at the bottom of "the mystery," as she called it; and whether he could not perhaps sweep it away. There was a terrible contrast between the casual gaiety with which such hints were dropped by her, and the something which lay behind; something which gave her voice a strange, unnatural ring, and cut her words off almost before they had any meaning; something the name of which, as it lurked in the hard, bright eyes which never met Julian's, was nervous fear.

Such hints were always met and turned by Julian as lightly as they were uttered.

Before a fortnight had passed since Miss Pomeroy's departure, Mrs. Romaine had acquired a habit of giving one quick, almost furtive, glance round any room she entered in which people were assembled, and that look was particularly eager and intent as she entered a drawing-room to fulfil an engagement for a luncheon-party one day at the beginning of the third week. A luncheon is by no means a bad opportunity for a "quiet chat." She did not see the figures she was in search of, though no one could have detected that fact from her expression. Nor could any one have interpreted the sudden exclamation of surprise she uttered.

"Why, it's Dennis Falconer!" she said prettily. "I had no idea you were in town."

It was Dennis Falconer; not a little altered by the past eight months, and altered for the better. Six months earlier he had disappeared from the ken of his society acquaintances; disappeared quietly, almost imperceptibly. By-and-by, when his absence began to be commented upon, rumour had whispered it abroad that he was "laid up or something." The fact, so lightly stated and equally lightly commented on, had meant for Falconer a realisation of the possibilities hinted at by his doctor early in November. He had passed from the dreariness of unoccupied and somewhat lonely club life into the infinitely heavier dreariness of a solitary sick-room.

Within his own limits and on his own lines Dennis Falconer was a strong man. With his dark hour absolutely upon him, he braced himself to meet it with stern dignity; and he endured four months of physical suffering and mental tedium—from which that suffering, weary and unrelenting as it was, was seldom acute enough to relieve him—with uncomplaining fortitude. He was quite alone. Circumstances had occurred to detain Dr. Aston in India, and his solitude was not realised by any of his club acquaintances. It was a period on which, in after life, he never willingly looked back; a dark hour, in truth. But it was lived through at last, and as it passed away it gave place to a clear and steady light, in which the shadows which had preceded it had vanished. Severe as had been the means, the end was amply attained. He emerged from his sick-room in such perfect physical health as he had not known for years. All the disabilities under which he had laboured during the preceding summer were removed, and in every nerve and muscle he was conscious of vigorous life. In May he had received his doctor's permission to return to his work, and he was in London now to arrange the preliminaries of an expedition with which he hoped to leave England early in the autumn.

The physical change in him was conspicuous as he stepped forward to return Mrs. Romaine's greeting. He looked ten years younger than he had been wont to look; the worn look of endurance had gone, and there was an air of strength and power about him which was very noticeable. Hardly less striking was the change in his expression. Much of the grim austerity of his demeanour during the previous summer had

originated in the painful depression consequent on his state of health; much also in his realisation of his position as a man laid aside and solacing himself as best he might. The gravity and reserve of his expression remained, but the heaviness had disappeared completely.

His manner to Mrs. Romaine, as he shook the hand she held out to him, was significant of the lighter and more tolerant point of view from which his own lighter prospects unconsciously led him to contemplate his fellow-creatures. It was neither expansive nor friendly, but it lacked that undercurrent of stiff condemnation which had previously characterised it.

"I have intended to call on you," he said with grave directness. "I am sorry to appear negligent. But my time is no longer at my own disposal."

Mrs. Romaine put aside the claim on his time which he imputed to her with a quick gesture and a laugh.

"You are quite recovered, I hope?" she said easily. "Tiresome business, convalescence, isn't it?"

"I am quite recovered, I am thankful to say," responded Falconer; he was so keenly conscious of all that the words meant for him that he was insensible even to the jarring effect her manner had always had for him. "I hope before very long to be at work again. Indeed, I am practically at work now."

"Yes?" said Mrs. Romaine prettily. "Are you thinking of going abroad again?"

"I am going out to Africa. I shall hardly be in England again for another five years."

Mrs. Romaine had been looking vaguely about the room, evidently bestowing a modicum of her attention only on Falconer. But as he spoke the last words the slightest possible start passed through her frame and her wandering eyes suddenly ceased to wander. There was a moment's pause, and then she turned them on Falconer's face.

"Really? And when do you go?"

There was something rather odd beneath the carelessness of her voice, and her eyes, as she fixed them on Falconer's, were odd too.

"I hope to leave England early in October."

Mrs. Romaine made no reply. Her face suggested curiously that the actual exigencies of the situation had faded



for her, that she was not in the present at all. For the moment there was no trace of that satisfaction and relief which would have been the natural consummation, on such news, of the defiance and distaste so hardly repressed in her manner to her "connexion" during the past year. She looked, apparently unconsciously, into the grave, steady man's face above her and there was a vague, half-formed expression in her eyes, which might have been a suddenly-stirred sense of loneliness or foreboding.

It was gone again in an instant. And as the man who was to take her in to lunch approached her, she turned from Falconer with the lightest possible "*Au revoir*."

Falconer found himself very well situated at luncheon. A question came up on which his word carried weight, and the discussion which ensued brought home to him that sense of renewed power and standing in the world so grateful to him after his long period of inaction. He was full of grave content and satisfaction, when, after lunch, circumstances threw him again with Mrs. Romaine; and his whole mental attitude was suffused with a dignified kindliness. He began to speak at once with grave, but not unfriendly interest, and as though he were conscious of a certain remissness.

"I am glad to hear of your son! I hope it is quite satisfactory to you?"

Mrs. Romaine had acknowledged his vicinity with a conventional word and smile. Circumstances demanded of her at the moment no active exertion; she was standing aside, as it were, for the instant, and there were tired lines faintly visible about her mouth. They disappeared, however, as if by magic, beneath the hard intentness which leapt into her face as she turned sharply to Falconer on his first words. The movement was apparently involuntary, for she turned away, lifting with elaborate carelessness the long eye-glasses which she had lately adopted, as though to cover the first movement, and said, as she looked through them at something at the other end of the room:

"It's very stupid of me, no doubt, but I must ask you to explain!"

The neutrality of her previous conversation with him had vanished as completely as the strange suggestion with which it had ended had vanished. The old defiance, apparently entirely uncalled-for, rang in her elaborately indifferent voice.

"Is it so old a story?" said Falconer. "Or is it, perhaps, a mistake?" he added with genuine regret. "I hope not. A sensible marriage is such a safeguard—a covenant with society. I heard of your son's engagement some three weeks ago on what purported to be excellent authority."

"Did you hear the name of the young lady by any chance?"

Mrs. Romaine achieved a harsh little laugh as she spoke.

Falconer glanced round the room and lowered his voice.

"Miss Maud Pomeroy!" he said. "A most desirable wife for him, I should have said!"

Eight months before, under the inexplicable influence of the face and manner of the pale, dignified woman who had faced him so bravely in the little lodging in Camden Town, Dennis Falconer had been almost ready to urge upon Julian Romaine marriage with the girl he was supposed to have ruined. But he would have done so convinced, in the recesses of his heart to which that woman's influence could not penetrate, that such a course must mean ruin to the young man; and in the grim severity of his mental attitude at the time, he would have said that such ruin was the just and righteous consequence of the young man's guilt. Clemence's disappearance had frustrated the possibility of any such action on his part; time and the pressing actualities of his own life had obliterated the impression made on him; and the whole affair had gradually faded into the past. Insensibly to himself he looked upon it now, conventionally enough, as one of those dark episodes which are in no way to be obliterated or lightened, but which may and must be overlaid. To that end it seemed to him, in the relaxation of his sterner attitude, a thing so natural as to be necessarily condoned that Julian should marry in his own class and settle down.

A moment's pause followed on his words. Mrs. Romaine was sweeping the room with her eye-glasses. The hand which held them shook a little, and, if the man beside her could have known it, she saw absolutely nothing.

"Maud Pomeroy!" she said at last, and she seemed to be unconscious of that moment's interval of silence. "Ah! Well, to tell you the truth, that is not such an extraordinary report, though it hardly represents the fact—at present. Young people will be young people, you know, and they must be allowed their little wilfulnesses!"

She then said, crossed her voice though it was high-pitched, and her speech was almost ~~exaggeratedly~~ confidential. Influenced by the tone and which they had thus taken, Fanny said, meaningly and not untruthfully:

"You may not be made to make so serious allowances, I hope."

With a laugh so light and high as to be painfully out of tune, Mrs. Komayne answered him gently in the negative. One more possibility, she said, was not such a very terrible thing in a given man's world, and she was charmed to say that with her own share of which they both knew her intimacies on for a moment had begun and ended. She held out her hand to Julian as he finished her assurance, parting with him with an interest as of ~~valued~~ friendship, and as he wished her goodbye looking down into the trivial vivacity of her face, Fanny for the first time stirred for the first time by a certain touch of pity for her. Coming upon his softer mood and the comparatively friendly nature of their talk, the eager assurance with which she spoke struck him as being not without pathos. He had no confidence in Julian, and it occurred to him vaguely and with a sense of surprise that if the security so superficially founded should prove false, the blow would be somewhat disproportionate to the lightness of the nature on which it must fall. The next instant he recollected how largely her own actions would have contributed to bring about the blow, and he dismissed her sternly from his thoughts as she passed out of the room.

Mrs. Komayne went straight home, though she had numerous calls on her list for the afternoon; her eyes were even desperately bright and defiant; and that same evening Marston Loring received a note asking him to come and see her on the following day.

He found her waiting for him in the drawing-room at the hour she had appointed, and she plunged into the matter in hand with an affection of spontaneous confidence which was most effective.

She had sent for him in his capacity of fellow-conspirator, she told him; she was in a little perplexity and she was turning to him, as usual—this with a charming smile—to help her. From this prelude she went on to speak of the strange change which had come about in the relations between herself and Julian on the one hand, and the Pomeroyes on the other.

Loring's keen eyes had detected this change some time since —by this time, indeed, it was being whispered about somewhat freely—but he only listened with grave attention. The upshot of her speech was: did Loring know anything about it? Had Julian said anything? Had he spoken of any quarrel, of any misunderstanding? Had his friend any kind of clue to give her as to his feelings on the subject?

The ease and gaiety of her manner, which strove to give to the whole thing something the air of a joke, was disturbed and broken as she came to the point by a feverishness about which there was nothing gay or light. And some uncertainty as to how far she had gone seemed to pervade her mind and to produce a feeling that some kind of explanation was necessary.

"You see," she said, "it isn't always safe to go to the fountain-head in these little matters! A young man doesn't always care to be questioned by his mother! One might 'give offence,' you know!" Her tone was playful, but her eyes were filled with the nervous fear which lurked in them so often when she and Julian were alone together, and the look on her face as she spoke her last words seemed to give to that fear a definite object. It was the fear of "giving offence" to her son.

Loring put the explanation aside with a smile, but he had no words of enlightenment for her. Julian, he said, had preserved a total silence on the subject.

"I will see what I can do," he said finally, with a smile that cancelled the offensiveness of the intention conveyed of "pumping" his friend. "And we will confer further. Meanwhile I know you will like to hear that his financial proceedings are prospering exceedingly, and are discretion itself!"

But the further conference, which took place in a day or two, was entirely fruitless as far as its nominal purpose was concerned. Loring did not reveal to Mrs. Romaine the exceeding brevity and decision with which Julian had dealt with any and every attempt to lead the conversation towards the Pomeroy's, but he gave her to understand that at present he had nothing to tell her.

One night, about a week later, when she and her son came home in the dawn of the July day from a series of "at homes," Mrs. Romaine, instead of saying good night to Julian at the door of her room, as was her custom, laid her hand sud-

denly on his arm and drew him just across the threshold. Her face was white to the very lips, and there was a set desperation in it stronger even than the fear with which her eyes were full. Her voice, as she spoke, was breathless and uncertain as though her heart beat with painful rapidity.

"Julian," she said, "what is it that has gone wrong between you and Maud Pomeroy?"

A flash, so quick in the passing that its intense bitterness was not to be detected, passed across Julian's face; it seemed to leave him armed with an expression of determined brightness which defied all emotion or sentiment.

"I don't know that anything has 'gone wrong,' dear," he said lightly.

His mother's hold on his arm tightened desperately.

"I saw what happened to-night in the supper-room," she said. "Won't you"—her voice broke, and there came to it a strangely beseeching note—"won't you tell me what it is?"

Julian's face grew rather set, and he paused a moment. Then he said, still in the same tone:

"It is nothing that I need worry you about, dear."

"Something might be done. If I knew what it was it could be set right, I know."

"No, dear!" The words came from Julian quickly and instantly, and there was a decision and significance behind his light tone now. Her speech had created a necessity, and he rose instinctively to meet it. "I'm awfully sorry to distress you, but I assure you nothing can be done. A girl must be allowed to know her own mind, you know. And a certain little question asked and answered, the only thing left to the fellow is to retire gracefully. I'm awfully sorry you are cut up about it; I was afraid you would be. Never mind, dear. I'm in no particular hurry."

He had gained in fluency and expansiveness of manner as he proceeded; the expedient had only occurred to him on the spur of the moment; and as he finished he bent down and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

"Good night," he said. "Sleep as well as I intend to do."

He left her with a nod and a smile, shutting the door behind him, and Mrs. Romaine stood for a moment motionless, as she had received his kiss, staring at the door through which

he had disappeared. Then she began to rub her hands feebly against one another as though a great cold had seized her. She was trembling from head to foot.

"Failed!"

She spoke the word half aloud in a low, shivering tone, which gave to its isolated utterance a strangely weird effect.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

MARSTON LORING was sitting at his writing-table, writing with an intentness which harmonised oddly with the suggestion of his evening dress—correct and up-to-date in the minutest particular. He had come rapidly out from the inner room two or three minutes before, evidently acting upon a recently formed determination ; and he was writing now swiftly and decisively. But there was nothing of rashness or impulsiveness about his face or manner as he wrote ; they were even keener, more calculating and cynical than usual. He finished his note, directed it with the same decision, pushed it aside, and, taking up an open letter which had been lying before him as he wrote, leant back in his chair, and began to re-read it. The note, on which the ink was scarcely dry, was addressed to a broker in the City. The letter which he had taken up bore the postmark of a small town in South Africa, and was marked “ Private ” and “ Urgent.”

Three days had passed since Julian’s explanation to his mother as to his relations with Miss Pomeroy.

Marston Loring had come back from South Africa three months before, with some very excellent machinery ready to his hand for the production of what would materially simplify and embellish his future career—a large fortune. That the machinery was such as a man of honour would have hesitated to put in motion ; that the hands which worked it could hardly escape unstained, affected him not at all. The stains were not such as could be pointed at ; it was hardly likely that they would be detected. Certain fellow mechanics were necessary to the proceedings ; one of these he had found in Ramsay ; the other he had created, so to speak, in Julian Romaine.

The first noticeable production of that machinery had been that first decisive rise in “ Welcomes ” at the end of June ; and since that time it had been worked—mainly by the master-mechanics, Ramsay and Loring—with unceasing skill, energy, and unscrupulousness. Various causes had co-operated to

prevent such a speedy consummation as Loring had anticipated when he told Julian that the inside of a month would see the end of the proceedings. The month had gone by, and the shares, though they were now worth ten times as much as had been paid for them by the three in whose hands they lay, had not yet touched the highest value to which it was proposed to raise them—to which they were rising, as a matter of fact, with ever-increasing rapidity. And yet, notwithstanding the apparent certainty that in another week his shares would have materially increased in value, the note which Loring had just written contained instructions for the disposal of all his interest in the Welcome Diamond Mining Company, without fail, on the following day.

A very small stone will put out of gear the most skilfully constructed and reliable machine. A very small modicum of fact will reduce the most skilful and elaborate fiction to its elements. The letter which Loring was studying now with knit brows and compressed lips brought him private information, which he knew might be public property twenty-four hours later, to the effect that the Welcome Diamond Mine was under water. As soon as that fact was generally made known, shares in the Company would be practically worthless.

He folded the letter and sat for a moment tapping it meditatively against the table. He was thinking deeply; not now about the actual contents of the letter, but of a question which they had raised in his mind; a question interwoven and complicated with other carefully-laid plans. Finally he threw the letter down on the table with a movement of sudden resolution.

"I must!" he said to himself. "It won't do to risk a row."

He glanced hastily at his watch, and then drew out a sheet of note-paper and wrote rapidly:

"DEAR JULIAN,

"Be here to-morrow at ten sharp. Don't fail.

"Yours,

"MARSTON LORING."

He directed the letter, and then rose quickly, took up the hat and light overcoat lying on a chair near him, and went out with the letter in his hand. At the porter's lodge he stopped.



"Get this sent by hand this evening," he said, giving the man the letter addressed to Julian. The other letter he posted himself as he passed along the Strand.

He was on his way to dine in Curzon Street, and among his subsequent engagements for the evening the Academy soirée occupied a prominent place.

It was nearly twelve o'clock when he arrived at Burlington House, and the vestibule and staircase were alike crowded with people going up and coming down; smiling, nodding, and generally obstructing the way, with a bland oblivion of any but their own individual rights to a passage.

At the foot of the stairs Loring was seized upon and absorbed in a portentous obstruction, of which the centre figure was Mrs. Halse, a truly electrifying figure in a painfully fashionable evening "frock" of a brilliant green.

"I was just looking for a man," she said, in her usual strident tones. "They get such an extraordinary lot of people together here that picking out any one one knows is like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay. I suppose nobody ever did look for a needle in a bundle of hay, by-the-bye. Mr. Halse isn't here, of course"—Mr. Halse was seldom known to appear in public, and when he did so, his meek presence was obviously entirely devoid of interest for his wife—"and I'm looking after Hilda Compton; her husband's coming to fetch her, but he doesn't care about her going about alone. Quite right, too, I tell him," she added, with a laugh. "But of course it won't last."

Hilda Compton, a three months' bride, was standing by looking like a Hilda Newton who had been born and bred in the centre of London society, daring in dress, self-possessed in manner, audaciously pretty in face.

She echoed Mrs. Halse's laugh, and the latter went on, to Loring:

"You can come upstairs with us. It's such a bore not to have a man!" and turning, led the way.

That characteristic feature in her vociferous personality—Mrs. Halse's hobbies—had become crystallised to a great extent since Hilda Newton's engagement and marriage into a passion for matrimonial affairs; not necessarily for match-making; match-marring was quite as keen an interest with her.

The comments with which she beguiled their way into the

first room were mainly called forth by the young men and maidens of her acquaintance who happened to catch her eye, and whom she suspected of mutual likings or loathings. They had drifted half-way across the room without coming within speaking distance of any one they knew, when Mrs. Halse broke off in an energetically-whispered account of a certain pretty young woman's partiality for—according to Mrs. Halse—an unresponsive young man, and exclaimed suddenly :

“That's Maud Pomeroy over there, isn't it? It's my belief that she wears those ridiculous white dresses so that people may have something to remember her by. There's nothing in her face, that's certain !”

Loring glanced through the doorway into the other room, to where Miss Pomeroy, in white silk, was smiling very prettily upon a young man who was obviously, if his countenance was to be relied upon, making inane remarks to her. He was a very rich young man, and he had lately succeeded to a title. Loring smiled rather enigmatically.

“It is surely impossible to associate two such dissimilar ideas as artifice and Miss Pomeroy—oil and water, you know.”

“Milk and water, you mean !” put in Mrs. Compton, with a laugh.

Mrs. Halse responded to the little witticism with obstreperous hilarity, and then turned suddenly and confidentially to Loring, and spoke in an eager semi-whisper :

“Now, perhaps you can tell me,” she said ; “nobody who knows her seems to have been able to pick up anything—not that she has any intimate friends, that kind of girl never has. But you know him, and men gossip much more than women, when all's said and done. Has she behaved infamously to him, or has he behaved infamously to her?”

“Has who behaved infamously to whom?” said Loring, smiling.

Mrs. Halse unfurled her fan, and began to waft it vigorously and excitedly to and fro.

“You do know something about it !” she exclaimed. “Hilda, he wouldn't fence like that unless he knew something. But you're not going to get out of it like that,” she continued, addressing herself again to Loring. “I'll tell you plainly of whom I am talking, and you'll tell me plainly what has happened. Maud Pomeroy is the she, and young Romaine is the he. Now, then.”

"I give you my word that I know nothing about it."

"I don't believe you," was the answer, given with uncompromising vigour and directness. "Good heavens! Somebody must know something about it. A month ago the Romaynes and the Pomeroyes were never apart. You couldn't go into a room without seeing him making eyes at her, and her simpering up at him, and their respective mammas exchanging confidences in corners. I was within an ace of congratulating them all round heaps of times. I lived with my mouth open to do it, so to speak; they all seemed so keen about it, it was evidently a matter for fervent congratulation. Though why Mrs. Pomeroy should have cared about it I can't think!" this parenthetically. "He won't have anything of his own while his mother lives. I suppose Maud fancied him! It's my belief that that poor woman daren't call her soul her own where Miss Maud is concerned!"

Mrs. Halse paused, but only for the purpose of taking breath. That very necessary process being accomplished, she continued her summary of the position:

"Then she goes to stay with prospective mamma-in-law, and we all stand on tip-toe and hold our breath. She spends a fortnight there, and the next thing we know is that the whole affair is apparently off! Off, if you please. No more making of eyes, no more simperings, no more confidences. And no explanation of any sort or kind. Mr. Loring, I cannot stand it, and I insist on knowing what you know."

"Mrs. Halse, you do know what I know—that is—nothing."

If a large and smart lady could by any possibility permit herself to stamp a large and heavy foot in the midst of a crowded and fashionable assembly, Mrs. Halse stamped hers at that moment. She gazed for an instant into Loring's imperturbable face, and then, becoming convinced of his sincerity, she turned to Mrs. Compton with a gesture of despair.

"Hilda!" she said, "if somebody doesn't find out something soon, I shall die of suspense!"

As it seemed not improbable from her demeanour at the moment that she would obviate the chances of such a calamity by hurling herself upon one of the objects of her interest and wresting a solution of the mystery from him or her by main force, it was perhaps as well at that moment a temporary distraction presented itself in the shape of a popular actor. Mrs.

Halse was very fond of popular actors ; they had been a hobby with her at one time. And in the movement and breaking up of the group which ensued, Loring drifted quietly away.

He had made his way gradually into the big room, when he suddenly quickened his steps and began to thread his way skilfully and rapidly through the crowd. Mrs. Romaine was standing on the opposite side of the room, smiling an invitation to him to come and speak to her.

Mrs. Romaine had not been looking her best lately. Somehow the piquant style and daring colour which she affected hardly suited her as they had been wont to do. To-night there was a tired look upon her face which seemed to reveal some recently-traced lines about her mouth ; lines of intense and almost dogged determination ; and to her sparkling eyes, if she allowed them a moment's repose, there came a haggard look, which had seemed for the last three days to lie only just beneath the surface. But these were subtle, hardly perceptible points, and for the rest she remained a noticeably attractive woman of the most pronounced artificial type.

"Where's the boy?" said Loring easily, when they had shaken hands. "Is he here?"

Mrs. Romaine shook her head and laughed.

"No!" she said. "He rather bars the *soirée*. A mistake, I think. One must take it for what it is, of course ; an omnium-gatherum of a perfectly preposterous nature ; looked at from that point of view it's not unfunny ! Do look at that girl over there ! She thinks her garment is a revelation to all beholders !"

"So it is," returned Loring drily.

Mrs. Romaine laughed, and dropped the glasses with which she had been coolly surveying the garment in question.

"That was rather obvious, wasn't it?" she said gaily. "By-the-bye, did you want to see Julian?"

There was a moment's pause after Loring had replied, pleasantly enough, in the negative, and then Mrs. Romaine looked up at him suddenly, and said :

"It's frightfully hot in here, don't you think ? Suppose we try one of the less popular rooms?" She stopped a moment, and then added with her most artificial laugh : "Of course, you gather from that that I'm going to victimise you again ? Yes ; I do want a little quiet talk with you. Who'd be a conspirator ?"

There was nothing of the unwilling victim, at least, in Loring's tone or manner as he deprecated her words. Nor was there either reluctance or tedium in his face as he followed her through the room. On the contrary, it was almost lighted up by an expression of sudden purpose.

Mrs. Romaine led the way to the almost deserted miniature room, and they began to walk slowly up and down, to all intents and purposes alone together. There seemed to be no particular point to Mrs. Romaine's desire for a private conference with her fellow-conspirator. She talked about Julian; talked about him carelessly, artificially, but with a persistence which only another mother could have understood; slipping in little questions now and then on all sorts of details connected with that business side of a man's life, as to which, she said, "women are always so in the dark;" and reverting again and again to her satisfaction and reliance in his mentor.

"It's rather absurd to quote those ridiculous old proverbs," she said at last, laughing affectedly, "but isn't there one, or a fable, or something, about a duck whose chickens—no, a hen whose chickens, it would be, wouldn't it?—would take to the water, and agitate her awfully because she couldn't go after them? That's exactly what I feel like, I assure you. And I look upon you as an exceptionally sensible water-bird who is also at home on the land—a kind of connecting link. Humiliating similes, aren't they?"

Loring smiled in answer to her laugh. But his tone as he answered her was rather grave.

"Not by any means humiliating as far as I am concerned," he said; "for you assume a certain amount of sympathy between yourself and me. May I tell you what a pleasure that idea gives me?"

He spoke slowly and deliberately, and Mrs. Romaine started slightly. She glanced up at his face for an instant, unfurling her fan, and using it gently, as though the movement were an outlet for some sort of faint agitation. Loring was not looking at her, his eyes were fixed for the moment on the opposite wall, and his profile told her nothing. There was a hardly perceptible pause, and then he went on, with an admirable mixture of deference, admiration—the depth of which seemed the greater in that it was rather suggested than expressed—and the practical confidence of a man of the world.

"Don't think that I am underrating Julian," he said, "or

that my regard for him, personally, is anything but a very warm and sincere affair, when I tell you that it is a long time now since Julian has figured in my thoughts as anything but his mother's son. Because he is his mother's son there are very few things I would not do for him, very little trouble I would not take for him."

He hardly paused. Mrs. Romaine, rather, broke in on his speech with a high-pitched laugh.

"That's very kind and flattering," she said, and there was something astonishingly hasty and nervous in the way she spoke.

"I hope it doesn't come upon you quite as a surprise," answered Loring, with the slightest suggestion of a cynical smile unseen by Mrs. Romaine. "I hope it doesn't need any words of mine to show you what I have tried to show you in more practical ways. You have honoured me with a great deal of confidence, and you have honoured me still further by putting it in my power to be of some slight service to you. Will you not give me still further powers in that direction? Will you not make our interests practically one by becoming my wife?"

He turned to her as he finished, and in spite of the admirable composure and deference with which he had spoken, his eyes were very eager and elated, almost as though with anticipated triumph.

Mrs. Romaine met his eyes, and stood for a moment gazing into them speechless and motionless, as though the blank astonishment written on every line of her face had absolutely paralysed her.

"Mr. Loring!" she said at last, and there was an almost bewildered remonstrance in her low, astonished tone. "My dear Mr. Loring!"

"One moment," he interposed quickly. "Of course, I don't ask you to look upon it as anything but a question of expediency and mutual goodwill and esteem. We are both of us very well aware that London is not Arcadia! You won't consider it brutal frankness on my part, I'm sure, if I tell you that from a financial point of view our positions are not unequal. I have been exceptionally fortunate lately, and I can offer you an income of about five thousand a year. And if a man's assistance and support counts for something in your life, as I hope it may——"

Mrs. Romaine interrupted him. With all the tact and

practicality of a woman of the world, she had mastered her amazement and was mistress of the situation. She spoke kindly and composedly, with just that touch of delicate concern which the occasion demanded.

"Don't say any more, please ; it is really quite impossible."

A sudden flash of surprise passed across Marston Loring's face, and he paused a moment, his keen eyes fixed scrutinisingly on her face. He was trying to detect there some signs of that coquetry or affectation of reluctance which he believed must surely underlie her words. His scrutiny failed to detect anything of the kind, however, and an unpleasant glitter came into his eyes.

"Impossible is a rather curt word," he said. "May I ask you to amplify it?"

He saw the colour rise beneath her paint as she answered :

"I have not the faintest intention of marrying, in the first place. And even if there were not innumerable other reasons against what you propose, I'm afraid I have no fancy for making myself ridiculous ! Oh, of course I am well aware"—she laughed a little—"that in my capacity of silly old mother I am as ridiculous as any woman need be ! But really, I cannot add another farcical part to that farcical rôle."

"And that farcical part would be——?" enquired Loring.

"That of the old wife of a young husband," she answered, with artificial mirth. "Mr. Loring, I am really sorrier, if you are indeed disappointed, than I can tell you. If you have thought that I encouraged you—— But that is too utterly preposterous ! I have considered you simply as my son's friend—almost my son's contemporary—a young man with an exceptionally wise and reliable head. Certainly not as a young man who would be foolish enough to want to marry a woman old enough to be his mother."

Loring's lips were rather thin, and his eyes glittered dangerously. As she stood looking at him then, with a certain softening excitement about her face, there was no slightest suggestion of age about her ; nothing but an admirably developed and preserved maturity. And Loring was a young man in nothing but years.

"That is a mere form of words, if you will pardon my saying so," he said, and his voice was dangerously quiet and controlled. "There is difference between us in years, of course, but that goes for nothing. In experience, in knowledge of

the world, if I may say so, the difference between us is practically nil. I am, as you say, your son's friend. But is that a reason for refusing me a larger form of the right which you yourself have pressed upon me, to watch over him and to supplement your care where it must inevitably fall short? For Julian's sake!"

He was confronting her now, looking straight down at her, and as he spoke the last words, all the concern and agitation, partly affected, partly real, with which her face had been moved, vanished before a set expression of unalterable resolution.

"For Julian's sake," she said, in a low, decisive voice, "it is impossible."

He stood for a moment watching her, all the evil of his face standing out in intense relief, and then he made a slight, cold gesture of acquiescence.

"May I take you back into the large room?" he said.

She held out her hand to him with an eager gesture of apology and appeal.

"We are friends still?" she murmured. And the murmur was almost pathetically genuine in its anxiety. "It makes no difference?"

Loring's mouth was not good to look at as he answered in a tone absolutely destitute of expression:

"Certainly not!"



## CHAPTER XXXIV

IF evil thoughts and evil passions could have a tangible effect upon the physical atmosphere, the air of Marston Loring's room, an hour later, should have been thick and heavy. He was sitting thrown back in an easy-chair, his evening coat replaced by a smoking jacket, a glass of whisky and seltzer-water close to his hand. There were also cigars on the table, but he was not smoking. He was staring straight before him into vacancy. His face was pale and set with vindictive passion, to the existence of which in his nature the general callousness of his expression gave no clue.

It was many years since Marston Loring had felt as he felt to-night. It was many years since he had been foiled and thwarted—"made a fool of," as he himself would have said; and all that was blackest and worst in the man was roused by the process. His life, ever since he had realised, at the age of twenty-five, that there were prizes in the world which some men obtained and other men failed to obtain, had been ruled by a series of carefully made and elaborately worked out calculations. Everything he had done, and everything he had not done, had been included in one or other of these calculations; carefully designed to meet certain ends, all of which met and culminated in the one great end of existence as he conceived it—material prosperity and position.

He had been, perhaps, as vicious a youth as could have been found in London, and he had not ceased to be vicious as a man. But he so managed his vices that even the reputation which clung to him had contributed to his success. The question of marriage he had discussed with himself on more than one occasion, always solely from the point of view of expediency. And just about the time when Mrs. Romaine made her appearance in London society he had come to the conclusion that, given the right sort of woman, the step might possibly prove advantageous. He had been considerably struck by Mrs. Romaine from the first; she was the kind of woman he greatly admired, and he was well aware that to be on terms

of intimacy with such a social power was an excellent thing for a man in his position ; a position which, as he was also well aware, was by no means so secure as most people supposed. It was from this point of view that he had cultivated Julian, and, at first, from this point of view only. The idea of Mrs. Romaine as a possible wife occurred to him later. But when it did occur, it developed into active intention with considerable rapidity.

He had looked at the question from every possible point of view, and decided that nothing could suit him better. He had no taste for young women. He admired Mrs. Romaine as much as it was possible to him to admire any one ; she was "the kind of woman he could get on with," he told himself. She possessed exceptional advantages in the matter of social standing, and she had money. Her eager cultivation of him during the autumn that followed her first season in town convinced him that with a little trouble she could be brought to forget the disadvantage of his comparative poverty ; and he would have proposed to her in the ensuing winter had not his voyage to the Cape prevented. He had come back with the prospect of a fortune of his own. But the fact made no difference to his matrimonial plans. Where there is money more money is always to be desired. Mrs. Romaine's fortune was no longer absolutely necessary to him, but it had not ceased to be desirable, and her other advantages remained intact. She had received him with enthusiasm, she had cultivated him assiduously ; she had absolutely led him on, as it seemed to Loring. He, in common with the rest of the world, regarded her relations with her son as the merest pose, and her appeal for his help with Julian had seemed to him simply the most transparent of subterfuges. He had no more doubted that she would accept him than he had doubted his own existence. And now his plans were frustrated, his calculations were falsified, and his very practical and material castles in the air were laid in the dust. He was refused.

He roused himself at last, and the faintest suggestion of a cruel smile curved his thin lips. He lifted the glass by his side, drank off its contents, and then turned out the lamp and went into the inner room.

His face was quite itself the next morning ; the scowl and the cruelty had alike disappeared ; and it was with an even less cynical smile than usual that he looked up from his morning

paper at a few minutes past ten o'clock, as the door opened with a hasty knock, and Julian Romaine appeared.

"Good morning, dear boy!" said Loring pleasantly.

"Morning, old man!" responded Julian.

He was looking rather pale and anxious, and he went on quickly:

"Nothing wrong with 'Welcomes,' I hope?"

Loring smiled again.

"Nothing in the world, as far as I know," he said gaily.

"What a nervous fellow you are!"

"What an unreasonable fellow you are!" retorted Julian, the cloud vanishing from his face as if by magic. "What do you mean by dragging a poor wretch down here at this hour in the morning, whether he will or no? What's up?"

It was some legal business, it appeared; and Loring proceeded to go into it with great circumstance. It sounded very important as he put it, but Julian took his leave, declaring gaily that he "didn't see where the urgency came in."

"You're such an abominably hard-working fellow!" he said lightly.

"Perhaps!" returned Loring. "It's not such a bad principle, and it's an excellent character to have, let me tell you. By-the-bye, Julian," he continued, as the young man turned away with a laugh, and laid his hand on the door, "how would you like to have a few more Welcomes?"

He rose as he spoke, and stood leaning against the mantel-piece with his back to the empty grate, confronting Julian as the young man turned sharply towards him.

"What do you mean?" said Julian. "Are there any in the market?"

"Well, yes," said Loring quietly. "The fact is, there's a certain shooting in Scotland which I have coveted for years. It's for sale now, and on uncommonly reasonable terms. Of course, it's appalling extravagance on my part, for the shares are going up every day. But I am going to sell a thousand pounds' worth of Welcomes to-day and buy that moor."

"It is extravagance!" said Julian, and there was an eager light in his blue eyes.

"Like to have the shares?" said Loring imperturbably.

Julian hesitated.

"I should like them, of course," he said, rather breathlessly.

"So would lots of other fellows. But, you see, my thousands,

what there were of them, are all locked up in the Welcome already."

"You wouldn't think it worth while to borrow, I suppose?" enquired Loring carelessly.

"There's a little difficulty known as security."

"For some fellows, of course," was the answer. "But not for you. You've got money coming to you."

Julian coloured a dull red, and looked down at the carpet, moving his foot to and fro uneasily.

The idea of raising money on a reversion for such a purpose was for the moment inexpressibly repugnant to him.

"The shares are going up every day," said Loring; "you ought to make a good thing of it; and you'll sell at the end of this week, I take it? However, of course, I don't want to press you. They'll go off fast enough."

Julian lifted his head suddenly, and drove his clenched hand deep down into his pocket.

"I'll do it," he said. "All right, Loring, I'll take them."

"To-day?" said Loring suavely.

"To-day!" returned Julian, almost fiercely.

He turned and left the room abruptly, without another word. And Loring, with the smile of the night before touching his lips once more, took up his paper again. Apparently he had forgotten the letter he had received from South Africa on the previous day, and the news it contained.

## CHAPTER XXXV

It was six o'clock on the following day, and in the sunset light of the July evening—a light with which the bustling, hurrying, unlovely crowd on which it fell seemed strangely out of harmony—the current of human life was setting strongly in every direction from the City. Along Cornhill, going against the stream, but driven, nevertheless, at a pace which was looked upon far from favourably by the police occupied in regulating the traffic, there came a hansom cab. In the cab, with one hand gripping the doors until the knuckles stood out white, was Julian Romaine. His hat was pulled slightly forward over his brow, as if with some half-conscious sense of the ghastliness of his face, some instinct to hide that ghastliness from casual eyes. His face was of a livid pallor. There were grey shadows about the mouth, which was set into hard lines of temporary and difficult self-control. His nostrils, not sensitive as a rule, quivered slightly as the pace of his horse slackened perforce now and again ; he gave no other slightest sign of consciousness of his surroundings.

The cab turned out of Cornhill, and in another second pulled up suddenly. Almost before the cab had stopped, Julian flung open the doors and leapt out. He paid the man double his fare, dashed into the building before which they had stopped, and up the stairs to an office on the second floor. His hand was shaking like a leaf as he stretched it out to try the lock of the door. It yielded to his touch, and he flung it roughly open and passed rapidly in. The outer office had only one occupant, a rather feeble-looking little man, who was trying to improve the appearance of a shabby hat by a careful application of his coat-sleeve. He looked up with a start on Julian's entrance, and an expression of comprehending concern dawned on his face. He was the messenger of the Welcome Diamond Mining Company. Before he could speak, however, a hoarse, peremptory question broke from Julian :

“Mr. Ramsay's not gone?”

“Not yet, sir,” was the answer, given with timid alacrity.

"He's here later than usual to-night, you see, in consequence——"

But before the first words were fairly uttered, Julian had crossed the room, and as he reached the second door leading into the inner office, it opened quietly, and Ramsay stood on the threshold. He was looking as imperturbable and uninterested as usual, and his voice was dry indifference itself as he observed :

"I have been expecting you all day."

Without a word Julian strode past him into the manager's room, and then, as Ramsay shut the door calmly, he said, in a quick, unnatural tone, which also carried with it a curious suggestion that he had not even heard Ramsay's words :

"It's a mistake! It's a mistake! It must be!"

Ramsay's only answer was a slight shrug of the shoulders as his dull eyes rested, apparently with complete indifference, upon Julian's face ; and the latter went on, rapidly and unevenly :

"I've only just heard. I've been out of town all day. I've come to hear—to see what can be done."

The last words were hardly audible, as though his mouth was so parched that he could hardly articulate. He lifted his hand as if involuntarily, and pushed back his hat, fixing a pair of fierce, burning eyes upon Ramsay.

"There's nothing to be done, of course," said Ramsay drily. "The thing's collapsed."

A harsh, wild laugh rang through the room, its faint echoes startling the little man in the outer office.

"Collapsed!" cried Julian. "Collapsed, by Heaven!"

He put out one hand gropingly, caught at a chair near him and dropped heavily into it, letting his face fall forward upon his folded arms as they rested upon its back.

Only half an hour had passed since he had gone to his rooms in the Temple after a picnic on the river, to find waiting for him there a telegram from Ramsay. And into that half-hour had been compressed such a desperate stand against despair as is little less terrible than despair itself. The telegram had told him that on the opening of the Stock Exchange that morning it had been spread abroad on unimpeachable authority that the Welcome Diamond Mine was under water. This evening, the inevitable sequel of such a fact, as he knew too well, shares in the Welcome Diamond Mining Company were so much waste-paper.

Ramsay stood for a moment looking at him, with a rather curious expression on his inexpressive face.

"It's a turn of the game," he said drily. "If you stand to win, you must stand to lose, too. You hadn't thought of that, I suppose?"

With a sudden tumultuous movement, as though his agony of mind was no longer to be endured in stillness, Julian sprang from his chair and began to walk up and down the room with hasty, uneven strides.

"Thought of it!" he cried. "What was there to make one think of it? It was a certainty yesterday, man; a certainty!"

A spasm passed across his face, and seemed to cut off his words, and Ramsay observed sententiously:

"It's a mistake to reckon anything as a certainty till you hold it in your hand."

Julian faced round suddenly and confronted him, his eyes blazing, every feature working.

"What the devil is the good of saying things like that?" he demanded. "Can't you understand that I have reckoned on it, as you call it? Can't you understand that it was all or nothing with me, and I am just done? Can't you understand——"

He broke off suddenly, and, turning away with a heavy groan, flung himself into a chair, and let his face fall forward on the table. For all that he was face to face with at that moment he could have found no words. The remorse, the sense of failure and helplessness, the despair which seemed to be tearing his heart to pieces, were one intolerable anguish.

Ramsay followed him with his eyes, and then crossed the room quietly, and stood beside his bowed figure, which was shaken now and again from head to foot.

"Is it so bad as this, boy?" he said quietly. Then, as there came no answer, he went on meditatively: "Ten thousand pounds! Ten thousand isn't so much to lose. Counters in the game, that's all."

He paused, and after a moment Julian lifted his face, haggard and drawn.

"It's the stake you must look to," he said. "My stake was heavy, Ramsay. Oh, you're right enough. Ten thousand pounds isn't much. I borrowed a thousand yesterday—raised it on a reversion—to get hold of some shares Loring wanted to sell. That wasn't much either, of course."

He had spoken in a dreary, monotonous voice, which was inexpressibly hopeless. And Ramsay's eyes were fixed keenly on him as their owner said drily :

"You bought a thousand pounds' worth of Loring's shares yesterday? Did you know that he was selling out all his interest in the Welcome?"

Julian turned with a quick, startled movement, and then paused.

"All his interest?" he repeated. "He wanted a thousand to pay for a Scotch moor, that was all."

"He sold every share he had yesterday," returned Ramsay. "Curious coincidence."

"You don't mean to tell me——"

The eyes of the two men met; and Julian sprang to his feet with a fierce imprecation.

"He knew it?" he cried; "he knew it, and kept it dark, that he might keep the market to himself? It isn't possible, Ramsay; it isn't possible!"

"Nothing is impossible," returned Ramsay quietly.

A savage hissing breath came from between Julian's set teeth, and he seemed literally alive with passion. Without a word he stretched out his hand for his hat and turned to leave the room. Ramsay quietly intercepted his passage.

"Where are you going?" he said.

"I'm going to see Mr. Loring."

The slightest possible smile touched the elder man's lips, and he said:

"All right. I shall have something to say to Mr. Loring, too. But listen to me, first. Was it a desperate necessity to you to pull off this affair?"

Julian did not speak. His lips twitched for a moment, then settled into a thin line; and the look in his eyes was answer enough.

"Very good, then," said Ramsay. "Come and see me here to-morrow at six. I may be able to give you a hand."

With a gesture of uncomprehending assent, but with no word of answer, Julian turned away and left the room.

Three-quarters of an hour later he was coming rapidly down the staircase which led from Loring's chambers. His face was flushed and quivering, and every pulse was beating madly, like the pulses of a man who has just given unrestrained



expression to furious passion. He turned on to the Embankment, and began to walk away in a headlong fashion, evidently neither knowing nor caring where he was going.

And as he walked the tumultuous life and glow of his face died slowly out, and settled into a haggard, sullen mask of dull despair. He had spoken his mind to Loring, and now there was nothing more for him to do.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

"WE are all the slaves of man, my dear Lady Bracondale. You are kept in town because Parliament insists on keeping your husband ; and I am kept in town because—oh, because the most capricious young man in London happens to be my son !"

An afternoon call in the first week of August is distinctly an anomaly, and seems to partake somewhat of the nature of a visit of condolence. Parliament was sitting late this year, and those hapless wives who considered it their duty to wait in town until their legislating husbands were released, visited one another and were visited by the one or two acquaintances detained in London by other causes, in a manner which betrayed a combination of martyrdom and shamefacedness.

Lady Bracondale, who was nothing if not a personification of duty done, or in the act of doing, was being condoled with, or called upon, on this particular August afternoon, by two distinct sets of sympathising acquaintances ; two sets, which, in spite of placid words and pretty speeches, seemed to be entirely incapable of amalgamation ; Mrs. Romaine, and Mrs. Pomeroy and her daughter, who had arrived a few minutes later. And it was to Mrs. Pomeroy that Lady Bracondale—who had a peculiar gift for saying in a stately and condescending manner the things which quicker perceptions would have recognised as not being precisely the best things to be said under the circumstances—turned, as Mrs. Romaine stopped speaking.

"I suppose Mrs. Romaine looks upon you as the exception that proves her rule," she said. "For it is not a case of manly compulsion with you, I believe ? I hope your sister goes on well ?"

Mrs. Pomeroy, having neither husband nor son, was detained in town by the presence in her house of the sister whom she had visited earlier in the year, and who had spent the last month under the care of a London doctor. But her tone was as placid as ever as she replied :

"Thank you, I believe they consider her nearly recovered,

for the time being. She hopes to go home this week. And then Maud and I will go and pay some country visits. We don't think of going abroad this year. I shouldn't feel easy to be out of England while my sister remains in this state."

"But that's not compulsion at all!" exclaimed Mrs. Romaine gaily. "You are acting entirely on your own impulse. Now, just consider my hard case. We were going to Pontresina; you know I'm very fond of Pontresina; it's such a dear, bright, amusing place. And we were to have started yesterday. Now, imagine my feelings when, two nights ago, that boy of mine came home, and said that, on the whole, he thought he'd rather not go abroad this year; he's taken with an enthusiasm for his profession, if you please, and he must needs stay somewhere quiet—so he says—and work at it. I must do him the justice to say that he was awfully apologetic, dear fellow!" Mrs. Romaine laughed her little affected, maternal laugh. "He was very anxious that I should go without him, and even offered to give up his own plan when he found how preposterous I thought that part of his idea."

There was not the faintest difference in Mrs. Romaine's voice by which it would have been possible to tell that her last statement was even less veracious than any other part of her speech, and that Julian's proposal to give up his plan was a figment of the moment only.

"And then of course I gave in," she continued. "Of course, he knew I should—the wretch! And we're to have a cottage on the river, and spend six weeks there."

She finished with a little grimace, and Lady Bracondale observed politely:

"I am afraid you'll find it rather dull."

"I shall find it very dull," returned Mrs. Romaine with ingenuous frankness. "I shall be bored to death. But, then, you all know that I am really a very ridiculous woman, and if my lord and master is content, there is nothing more to be said. He's kind enough to assure me that there are lots of nice people about! I don't know what kind of nice people one is likely to find about the river in August and September, but I take his word for it."

"I believe the Comptons have a house-boat somewhere," observed Miss Pomeroy.

It was her first contribution to the conversation, and it was made apparently rather because conventionality by this time

demanded a remark of some sort from her, than from any interest in the subject. Before any reply could be made, the door opened, and Marston Loring was announced.

Mrs. Romaine had been looking rather sharp-featured, and there was a great restlessness in her eyes. It seemed to leap up and then settle suddenly into comparative repose as they rested on Marston Loring, and as he turned to shake hands with her she greeted him gaily. It was their first meeting since the night of the Academy soirée, but Loring's manner was absolutely unmoved. His greeting to her differed in nowise from his greeting to the other two ladies, and if that fact in itself involved a subtle change in his demeanour towards her, the change was observed by one pair of eyes only—a pair of demure brown eyes. Miss Pomeroy had been a good deal interested in Marston Loring's comings and goings during the fortnight she spent in Queen Anne Street.

"I thought you were gone," Mrs. Romaine said lightly. "What are you doing in town to-day, may one ask, when you were booked to start for Norway yesterday?"

"Business," he returned, in a tone which addressed the whole company rather than any member of it individually. "I am investing in a Scotch moor, and I can't leave London till I have signed and sealed."

There was a delicate implication of wealth about the statement which seemed to give a curious fillip to the conversation; and an animated discussion ensued on Scotland, its charms and its disadvantages.

Mrs. Romaine held her part in the discussion with unfailing readiness, and as the subject exhausted itself she rose to take leave. She said good-bye in her usual charming manner to her hostess and to Mrs. Pomeroy and her daughter, and then she turned to Loring.

"By-the-bye," she said carelessly, "I've a piece of property of yours in the carriage. Did you know you had lost something when you called the other day? No, I shan't tell you what it is, you very careless person! But I'll give it you if you like to come down for it."

She turned away; Loring followed her perforce; and there was an ugly smile on his face as he did so. At the foot of the stairs she paused; then with a quick glance towards an open door which led into a dining-room, she went rapidly towards it, signing to him to follow her. Once within the room, she turned

and faced him. She was smiling still, but the smile was stiff and mechanical, and her eyes, as she fixed them on his face, were desperately anxious. There was a curious ring of conscious helplessness and reliance on the man to whom she spoke, about her voice as she began to speak.

"I wanted to speak to you," she said. "I'm so glad to see you. I'm rather perplexed. Julian has taken it into his head to stop in town, or, rather, close to town. He won't go abroad; he won't visit. Can you tell me the reason? Will you try and find out the reason? May I rely on you? But of course I know I may."

There was a tone almost of relief in her voice, as if in the mere making of the confidence, in the sense of companionship and support it gave her, she found some sort of ease.

And Loring smiled again as he met her eyes.

"I'm sorry to have to dispel an illusion which is so flattering to me," he said, with the slightest possible accentuation of his usual quiet cynicism of manner. "But it's useless to assume that I can be of any further service to you."

He stopped, watching with keen, relentless eyes the effect of his words. A startled look came to the face turned towards him. The eyebrows were lifted and contracted with a quick movement of perplexity. Evidently she believed that she had not fully understood him, for she did not speak, and he went on:

"Your son and I have quarrelled. He has insulted me grossly. For the future we are strangers to one another. Consequently you will see that I shall be no longer able to keep him out of mischief."

There was an indescribable tone in his voice, ominous and vindictive. And as he spoke, Mrs. Romaine's face seemed to grow old, and her eyes dilated.

"It can be put right," she said, in a quick, uncertain voice. "He will apologise. You will forgive——"

Loring interrupted her, very coldly and incisively.

"He will not apologise!" he said. "And I should not accept any apology. I needn't suggest, of course, that, under the circumstances, our acquaintance, much as I regret this, had perhaps better cease."

They faced each other for another moment, and into Mrs. Romaine's eyes there crept a sick despair strangely incongruous with the surface appearance of the position. Then she seemed

to recover herself as if with a tremendous effort of will. She drew herself up, bowed her head with grave dignity, and moved to leave the room. He held the door open for her with an absolutely expressionless countenance. She passed down the hall to where the servant was waiting at the door, went out, and got into her carriage alone.

Loring stood at the foot of the stairs watching her, and then turned with a cruel contentment in his eyes, and went upstairs again to the drawing-room.

The two elder ladies were sitting with their heads very close together, as he opened the drawing-room door, evidently deep in some question of domestic importance. And standing by a conservatory window at the other end of the room, a rather bored-looking figure in its solitary girlishness, was Maud Pomeroy. The occasion being, as has been said, something of an anomaly, conventions were not so strict as usual. Lady Bracondale just glanced up with a vague smile as Loring reappeared, and then became absorbed in conversation as he strolled across to Maud Pomeroy. She looked up at him with a faint smile.

"Has Mrs. Romaine gone?" she said.

He signified a careless assent, and then said:

"You are looking rather bored, do you know, Miss Pomeroy? Suppose we go and look at the flowers until we're wanted?"

She hesitated a moment, and then moved idly into the conservatory, looking back at Loring with a smile as he followed her.

"I was a little bored," she confessed. "It is very kind of you to come and amuse me."

For the next moment or two Loring could hardly be said to prove himself very amusing. He sauntered round the little conservatory at his companion's side, his eyes fixed keenly upon her impassive profile with something very calculating in their depths. Miss Pomeroy also was apparently absorbed in thought, and did not notice his silence.

"You are a great friend of the Romaines, are you not?" she said at last, in her thin, even, very "proper" tones.

Loring glanced at her again.

"Well," he said, "that's not a question that it's particularly easy for me to answer, to-day. I have been on fairly intimate terms with them, as you know. But do you know what that kind of thing sometimes leads to?"

Miss Pomeroy shook her head.

"Well, there is such a thing as knowing people too well," said Loring deliberately. "And then you find out little traits that don't do. To tell you the truth, Romaine and I have quarrelled."

"I'm glad of that," said Miss Pomeroy softly.

He looked at her quickly, but he was not quick enough to catch the spiteful gleam in her eyes.

"Would it be inquisitive to enquire why?" he said.

"I don't think Mr. Romaine is a nice young man," was the answer. "I would rather people I like——" She broke off in pretty confusion. "I would rather you weren't a friend of his, Mr. Loring. I think there's a great deal about him that nobody knows."

"Indeed!" said Loring, interrogatively and quietly.

"You see," she said, with charming seriousness, "I think a girl can often feel whether a man is nice or nasty quicker than another man can. Mr. Loring, has Mr. Romaine ever said anything to you—Oh, please don't think it's very odd of me to say such things to you! Has he ever said anything that made you think he might be married?"

There was a hardly perceptible pause—a hardly perceptible flash of comprehension on Loring's face, and the vindictive satisfaction in his eyes deepened.

"What makes you ask me that?" he said, in a tone which seemed to fence gravely with the suggestion rather than to repudiate it.

Miss Pomeroy responded with growing conviction.

"Because I'm quite sure that he is married. And, of course, as he doesn't own it, there must be something—something not nice about it. And it does seem to me so wrong that people should like him so much when he isn't a bit what they think he is."

The man's eyes and the girl's eyes met at that moment for the first time. The girl's were perfectly clear, mild, and expressionless, and into the man's there stole a cynical tinge of admiration.

"By Jove," he said to himself, "she is clever!"

At that instant Mrs. Pomeroy's voice was heard from the drawing-room calling placidly for her daughter. And Miss Pomeroy moved forward with graceful promptitude into the drawing-room.

"We shall meet in Scotland by-and-by, I believe," said Loring pleasantly, as he shook hands with Miss Pomeroy. "You were to be at the Stewarts', I believe, in the last week of September, and so am I. I shall look forward to it. Good-bye, Miss Pomeroy."

"Good-bye, Mr. Loring."

A few minutes later Loring also took leave of Lady Bracondale and went away. The satisfaction was stronger than ever in his eyes. Maud Pomeroy's words had somehow or other carried instantaneous conviction to his mind, and in the fact he believed them to contain he saw certain social ruin for Julian Romaine.

"He's done for himself all round," he said to himself as he let himself into his rooms half an hour later. "That nice little house in Chelsea will be to let next season."

At that same moment, in the manager's room at the offices of the Welcome Diamond Mining Company, Julian Romaine was standing by the table, looking down at Ramsay as the latter sat leaning back in his chair, indifferent enough in attitude, but with a hard intensity of expression in his dull eyes. Julian had evidently just risen, pushing back his chair, the back of which he was gripping almost convulsively. His face was ashen, his eyes were dilated with an expression of desperate, intolerable temptation.

"I'll do it," he was saying in a harsh, unnatural voice. "I'll do it, Ramsay. Shake hands on it."



## CHAPTER XXXVII

THE cottage which Mrs. Romaine had taken for August and September, on Julian's refusal to go abroad, was situated a few miles above Henley. It was a very charming little house, to which the term "cottage" was applicable only in mock humility; and it was very charmingly situated. It had a delightful garden, not large, but full of "roses, and sunflowers, and all sorts of things," as Mrs. Romaine explained to Julian after her visit of inspection. Its lawns sloped down to the river, and altogether, on the same authority, it was a wonderful chance to get hold of it.

The statement which Mrs. Romaine had made to Lady Bracondale on Julian's authority, that there were "nice people about," had originated, as a matter of fact, not with Julian, but with his mother herself. It was quite true, nevertheless; but apparently Julian's sudden desire for quiet had proved infectious. The acquaintance between herself and her present neighbours being of the slightest, Mrs. Romaine made no such attempt as might have been expected of her to develope that acquaintance.

She seemed to be strangely without impetus in herself towards action of any kind. She was "resting," some people might have said; she was pausing, certainly. But whether, as the days went on, her life did not signify rather temporary and enforced quiescence, than the peaceful and pleasant suspension of labour, might have been an open question.

It was a hot, bright August; day after day the sun shone steadily down, as Julian departed for town after an early breakfast, at which his mother never failed to appear. Day after day it shone through all the long, little-broken hours upon the quiet house and garden, about which the one woman's figure moved in almost total solitude, until, with the evening, Julian returned again. Evening after evening the mother and son spent alone, but by no means always together. After their dinner, during which conversation seldom flagged between them, any more than it would have flagged between two friendly

and well-bred acquaintances, Mrs. Romaine would sit in the drawing-room with a bit of fashionable fancy-work in her hand, into which she only occasionally put a stitch ; and sometimes Julian would spend half an hour with her there, reading the newspaper and carrying on the talk of dinner ; or sometimes he would stroll out into the garden at once, and come in only just before bed-time.

Mrs. Romaine never followed him and never questioned him. Perhaps it was the curiously still life she led which brought so strange and still an expression to her face, a stillness which suggested a slow, wearing waiting, and a mingled concentration, watchfulness, and patience.

It was an evening in the second week of September, and she was walking up and down the lawn in the fading sunset light. She was moving with slow, regular steps, with the monotonous motion of a woman to whom the even movement brought some sort of relief or soothing. There was an indescribable touch of desolateness about her lonely figure as she moved up and down before the empty house.

A servant came out to her by-and-by with some newly-arrived letters. She took them, and then, her monotonous motion being perforce suspended, a sense of physical fatigue seemed to assert itself, and she sat down on a low basket-chair.

A sigh came from her as she did so, one of those sighs which in their unconsciousness are so suggestive of habitual suffering. She paused a moment, looking away into space with absent eyes. Then she seemed to rouse herself and took up one of the letters as if forcing herself to seek relief from the current of her monotonous thoughts. She had opened the envelope, and read the letter half through in a mechanical, uninterested way, when its contents seemed suddenly to arrest her attention. A change came to her expression, a change which in its slight quickening and revival showed how dulled, almost numbed, it had been before.

She turned once more to the beginning of the letter and read it again.

“GLENFYLE, ROSS-SHIRE.

“DEAR MRS. ROMAYNE,

“I am so sorry to have ask you to postpone the visit which you had promised us for the end of this month.

I find that by some stupid mistake my husband and I have given separate invitations for the same date. As there is, unfortunately, no doubt that his invitation was given first, there falls upon me the very disagreeable task of explaining the situation to you and your son, and begging you to forgive me.

“Yours truly,

“MARION STEWART.”

Mrs. Romaine leant back in her chair, not indolently, but with an intent consideration in every line of her figure; and letting the hand that held the letter fall on her knee, she sat gazing at the written words with sharp, angrily sparkling eyes, which looked as though they were bent on piercing through the words themselves to the meaning which she believed they hid. She was evidently surprised and annoyed; as evidently she gave not an instant's credence to the reason alleged for the postponement of the visit in question; and the slight involved in this postponement, indefinite, as she noticed with an unpleasant little smile, seemed to stimulate her.

Her face had grown even vindictive, when her eyes fell on the postmark of the second letter lying on her knee. It was that of the same little Scotch town, the name of which was stamped upon the already opened envelope. She took it up eagerly, and as she saw the handwriting, she paused for an instant, and a flash of intense consideration passed across her face. Then she tore it hastily open. It was from Mrs. Pomeroy, and it conveyed in three long-winded and incoherent sheets a piece of news which the writer was sure would delight Mrs. Romaine.

“Dear Maud,” the letter said, was just engaged to “that charming Mr. Loring.” Mrs. Pomeroy's mind seemed to be in a state of somewhat considerable confusion between a theoretical and conventional sense that it was very sad for her to lose her daughter, and a certain practical and actual sense, which by no means harmonised with the theoretical one, and all unconsciously threw a good deal of light on the relations between the mother and daughter, as they actually existed. The coherence of the letter was further disturbed by sundry sentences, which dovetailed so oddly into the general fabric that they had somewhat the appearance of being inserted to order; sentences which conveyed various repetitions of “dear Maud's” assurance of Mrs. Romaine's congratulations; and

various repetitions of the statement that Mr. Loring's financial position had recently improved amazingly, and that he was sure of a seat in Parliament at the forthcoming general election.

"He has been staying with the Stewarts during the whole of our visit to them," the letter ended. "Dear Lady Marion has been so kind about it, and taken such an interest."

"Ah!"

The exclamation, uttered, evidently involuntarily, just above her breath, came from Mrs. Romaine's lips sharply and bitterly. She had read the letter through with certain quick movements of her eyebrows, and mocking smiles coming and going about her thin lips, and they smiled again as she folded the letter deliberately and put it back into its envelope. She was looking thoroughly roused now, and there was a confidence in her alert, determined expression. It was the kindling up of martial spirit at a challenging trumpet-call from a well-known battlefield.

If Marston Loring and his future wife were indeed arranging their forces for the undermining of Mrs. Romaine's social position—and Miss Pomeroy and Loring between them could have pieced out a very sufficient explanation of Lady Marion Stewart's note—the campaign, judging from appearances at that moment, was likely to be far from a tame one.

Mrs. Romaine was still sitting with the letters in her hand, tapping one foot with impatient vigour upon the grass, and there was the same eager intentness in her eyes, when from the house behind her the sound of a dinner-bell rang out. She started violently, and in the start something seemed to fall between her and the subject on which her thoughts had been busy. A curious shade of that new stillness replaced the energy on her face. It was the dressing-bell, and she rose mechanically; and as she turned towards the house her eyes fell upon the figure of Julian. He had evidently been standing on the verandah, and as she rose he had turned, and was disappearing into the house. Another shade of stillness fell upon her face, as though the letters she had received, and the feelings they had stirred, had receded into the distance.

If often happened that the mother and son did not meet, on Julian's return home in the evening, until dinner-time, and it happened so this evening. The dinner-bell was ringing

when Julian came downstairs with a quick word or two of apology, and followed his mother into the dining-room.

Julian looked as though his month's hard work had by no means agreed with him. His face was even painfully thin and worn, and there was an expression of hard concentration about it which seemed to age it strangely. His eyes were rather sunken. It was a curious feature of a change in him less easily defined, that his likeness to his mother had faded considerably. All the character of his face now seemed to originate about his mouth; that mouth of which Mrs. Romaine had been wont to say with affected gaiety that it was like nobody in particular; that mouth which had been a somewhat weak and undecided feature. There was nothing undecided about it now, and Mrs. Romaine never looked at it without a deepening of that stillness on her face. It was set into heavy, resolute lines.

No one, indeed, judging from the bare outline of Julian's daily life during that hot August, could have wondered at the signs of physical wear and tear that he exhibited. Ten o'clock, on every one of those sultry days, found him at work, not indeed in the Temple, but in an office in the City; and it was from the same office that he would issue forth at about five o'clock to catch the train for Henley, sometimes with sullen determination, sometimes with a pale, fierce excitement on his face.

The affairs of the Welcome Diamond Mining Company had readjusted themselves, after the blow which had threatened the company's very existence, as hardly the most sanguine could have hoped. Ten days after the announcement of the presence of water in the mine, some of the newspapers published another telegram which had been received by the directors. The passage of the water, by which the existing mine was rendered practically useless, had revealed hitherto unsuspected possibilities, and there appeared to be little doubt that the first mine had been, as it were, only a pledge of still richer strata yet to be worked. One telegram followed another, confirming the report in greater detail. Prospectuses were issued, setting forth a proposal to utilise the opportunity thus opened, and debentures were issued for the providing of the necessary funds. These debentures were taken up somewhat slowly at first, but on the arrival in England of specimens of diamonds from the new lead, together with a circumstantial report, they were taken

up with a rush. Works were understood to be already on foot, and dividends were looked for at an early date. The new managing director of the company was Julian Romaine.

There was a kind of dry excitement about him to-night behind the deliberate assumption of conversational interest which was his never-changing manner with his mother now, and his hand shook a little as he poured himself out more wine than usual.

He did not rejoin his mother in the drawing-room, saying something as she left him about having letters to write; and two hours afterwards he was walking up and down the lawn in the moonlight with a cigar.

There was a fierce restlessness in his step, and there was a fierce restlessness in his face, too. He had been walking there for half an hour when a shadow passed across the blind of the drawing-room window—the night was very hot and the window was wide open—and the blind was drawn up. Mrs. Romaine's figure stood there outlined by the lamplight within. The drawing-room window was shadowed from the moonlight by an angle of the house.

"Good night, Julian!" she called.

Julian stopped in his walk mechanically.

"Good night, mother!" he answered. The figure in the window seemed to hesitate for a moment; then Mrs. Romaine moved and drew down the blind, the lights in the room behind went out one by one, and Julian resumed his walk in the moonlight as mechanically as he had stopped it.

It was his custom to go, every morning, first to his room in the Temple in case any letters might be waiting for him there; and on the following morning, a slight accident on the line having considerably delayed his train, he paused a moment before giving his order to the cabman. He was very late, and there was a feverish impatience in every line of his face. He had almost decided that any private letters might wait until the next day, when, with a sudden, unaccountable reaction, he sprang into the cab and told the man to drive to the Temple.

He had apparently repented of the resolution by the time the cab stopped, for he sprang out with a muttered imprecation on the delay. There was only one letter waiting for him, and he caught it up fiercely. Then the handwriting in which it was directed caught his eye.

All the tumultuous heat and impatience of his face died out

suddenly and utterly. He stood for a moment staring down at the letter, white to the very lips. Then he seemed absolutely and physically to set his teeth, and in the intense hardness of determination which set its mark on every muscle of his face, his whole expression would have seemed to deteriorate, markedly and terribly, but for the desperation in his eyes which was little short of agony.

He moved abruptly, crossed the room, unlocked a drawer in his writing-table, and thrust the letter in with quick, deliberate movements, unopened. He locked the drawer again sharply, and turned and went hastily out of the room.

The letter was from Clemence ; it was the first sign of her existence which he had received since their parting on that June evening nearly three months ago.

He was looking only older, harder, and more recklessly resolute when about a quarter of an hour later he entered the office of the Welcome Diamond Mining Company. The feeble-looking little messenger was in solitary possession, and he looked up rather uneasily as Julian wished him a brief good morning and crossed to the door of the manager's room.

"Mr. Ramsay's just gone out, Mr. Romayne," he said. "I was to say he would be in again directly."

Julian made a curt gesture of assent and went on into the private room. There was plenty of work waiting for him, it appeared, and he was still applying himself to it with dogged concentration, when, nearly an hour later, the door opened and Ramsay appeared.

"There you are!" he said indifferently. "I thought you weren't going to turn up this morning."

Julian had just glanced up from the letter he was writing to acknowledge the other man's entrance, and he went on writing as he explained briefly that his train had been delayed.

"No particular reason for wanting me, I suppose?" he said in a brief, businesslike way, as he laid down his pen.

Ramsay sat down deliberately, and put his hand into the breast-pocket of his coat.

"Well, yes," he said. "There's a matter here which rather calls for the attention of the managing director."

He held out a letter as he spoke, and Julian took it and read it quickly. Then he laid it down on the table before him, and looked up slowly at Ramsay. His face was rather pale.

"A general meeting of shareholders!" he said. "Demanded!"

There was a moment's pause, while he looked steadily into Ramsay's immovable face, and then he added in the same rather difficult tone:

"Did you expect this, Ramsay?"

"I never expect," returned Ramsay drily. "Such a thing was on the cards, of course."

Julian's face grew dark and calculating.

"Well," he said harshly, after another moment's pause, "it must be arranged for, of course. What do you propose?"

Ramsay answered the question by another.

"Do you happen to know anything," he said, "of a man named Compton—Howard Compton?"

Julian's brows contracted as if with an involuntary effort to detect the relevancy of the question as he answered tersely:

"Yes. He and I belong to the same club."

"You didn't know, I suppose, that some shares in the Welcome have drifted into his hands?"

Julian shook his head with a quick frown of vexation.

"Ah!" observed Ramsay; "they have, though. And it has come to my knowledge that various enquiries have been made into the state of the Welcome Diamond Mine; made on the spot, and made in secret. And I've traced these enquiries to this Mr. Howard Compton."

A dreadful grey pallor had begun to spread itself over Julian's face, and the muscles seemed to have grown rigid with the intense force with which he held them to their expression of dogged determination. He did not speak, and Ramsay went on in the same dry, indifferent way:

"He is either a very clever hand, or very cleverly advised. The one point we score, at present, is that he has not done as he intended to do, and taken us by surprise."

"Do you mean to say——"

The words seemed to come from between Julian's dry, white lips almost without consciousness on his part. His eyes were fixed upon Ramsay with a hard, unseeing kind of stare, his voice was hoarse, uneven, and hardly audible, and it died away, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"The meaning is obvious, of course," returned Ramsay. "An affair of this kind is a ticklish thing to pull off, and a hitch of this kind is always possible, though I never came across an



affair in which it seemed less probable. I don't know yet exactly how much our friend knows. The meeting won't be a particularly placid affair, of course, and you're likely to have a warm time of it. But, of course, there's a chance that he mayn't know quite enough, and we may be able to pull it through, yet."

"And if not?"

Something seemed to rattle in Julian's throat as he spoke the words, and they came out thick and husky.

"If not?" repeated Ramsay. "Well, if not, I think I wouldn't go to that meeting if I were you."

There was a moment's dead silence, broken only by Julian's heavy, laboured breathing. The two men sat there face to face, and their eyes met with a terrible significance of what was better unexpressed in words. Then Ramsay's dull eyes took a deliberate survey of Julian's face. It was drawn and livid, and the elder man rose and took from the cupboard some brandy. He poured it into a glass with a slightly contemptuous smile, and put it into Julian's hand.

"You're the very devil to work," he said drily. "And for all I know you may be first-rate as a winner; but I can't say you're a good loser. And it's a useful lesson to learn in this business."

Julian drank the brandy and rose mechanically. The strong stimulant hardly seemed to touch the blanched horror of his face.

"What do you propose to do?" he said, in a stiff, toneless voice.

"Personally, nothing," returned Ramsay, "until I know more. Business will go on as usual. You'll call the meeting, of course. I'll tell Harrison to get the forms ready for you to sign. They must be sent out to-morrow. Going?"

"Yes," said Julian heavily. "There's nothing more I need do to-day."

He took his hat and went slowly out of the office, looking straight before him like a man walking in his sleep. Ramsay looked after him, and stood for a minute rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Not quite what I thought he was," he said to himself; "though he has served this purpose well enough. Pity he hasn't a little more of his father in him. Got all the makings of the right sort, but he can't stay."

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE early sunlight of a lovely September morning was streaming into the room through every crack and chink in the blinds and curtains, making the light from the still burning lamp look yellow, dim, and unnatural. It was Julian's sitting-room in the house in Chelsea, and the light, falling here and there, touched into distinctness many of those little luxurious details on which the evening light had fallen on that winter day eighteen months before, when Mrs. Romaine had stood upon the threshold and looked round upon her completed arrangements, waiting then for the use which was to give them life. On a chair by the writing-table, his head dropped sideways on his arm as it rested on the table, sat Julian Romaine asleep.

He was asleep, but he was not at rest. His face was grey and drawn; it twitched painfully, and his hand was fiercely clenched. Gradually an expression of terror and despair gathered on his features, until they were almost convulsed, and with a strangled, gasping cry he woke and started to his feet, trembling in every limb, and with great drops standing on his forehead. He stood clutching at a chair for support, while the first poignant impression of his dream subsided, and then he moved as though impelled by some reactionary impulse to collect himself. He glanced at the clock and saw that the hands pointed to a quarter past six. He was vaguely conscious of having heard it strike six, so that he could have slept for a few moments only. His lips twitched slightly at the thought of what those few moments had held for him. Then he realised that he was cold, that all his limbs were stiff and aching, and he dragged himself slowly across the room, drew the curtains and the blinds, and stood there in the sunshine.

It was the first movement of physical consciousness which he had felt since he left the office of the Welcome Diamond Mining Company on the morning of the previous day.

How that day had passed he did not know. Here and there in the blackness a picture of himself stood out with uncertain distinctness. He knew that he had telegraphed to his

mother to the effect that he might not return to Henley for some time. He remembered writing the words though he could recall no mental process by which the elaborate excuse he had made had occurred to him. He knew that somewhere dinner had been placed before him, though where, and whether he had eaten, he knew not at all. For the rest, an impression of ceaseless walking, of interminable streets giving place imperceptibly to the four walls of his own room, made up the only actual background in his memory to the intense mental consciousness which had usurped for the time being the tangibility of material things.

The favourable turn in the affairs of the Welcome Diamond Mining Company had been founded on a deliberate system of forgery and fraud, planned by Ramsay, subscribed to and participated in by Julian. The telegram as to the new lead had been concocted in the office in the City; the diamonds exhibited as earnest of the future yield of the mine had been bought for that purpose; and not one penny of the money paid in debentures had ever been intended for application to the working of the ruined mine. If these facts should come to light—and hostile enquiries once instituted on the spot, only one of those incredibly lucky chances to which gamblers and swindlers alike owe so much could avert such a catastrophe—the consequences were obvious. Public exposure, public ignominy and execration, wholesale and irremediable loss of position, were absolutely inevitable. And as inevitable if he remained in England, the dark gulf in which his life must be swallowed up and closed—as far as everything which constituted life for him was concerned—whether he fled from it or whether it clutched him, was the legitimate reward of his doings; penal servitude.

He could not realise it. He could not face it. He had beaten it back, he had thrust it down again and again during that long day and night, and again and again the horror had swept over him, gaining always in certainty and reality. Struggle against it as he might and did, clutching at his consciousness, shaking and rending it with a force not to be resisted, and growing ever stronger and stronger, there dawned a dazed, bewildered conviction that the end he saw before him was indeed the inevitable end; that in that black gulf, and no other, all his efforts and fierce strivings were to find their consummation.

He had dug it with his own hands ; he had followed on towards it in a very desperation of defiance and recklessness, goaded by a grinding sense of failure and frustration to a wild daring which had looked like courage and resolution. But the spirit which had stimulated him was not in himself. All unconscious of it as he was, he had been drunk with the thought of what lay beyond that gulf ; drunk with a desperate, unreasoning anticipation of triumph. The hideous possibility of failure confronted him now practically for the first time, and before it all his fictitious stamina shrivelled away, as in its very nature it was bound to do. A vague, confounded comprehension of the consequences which he had brought upon himself rose upon him, walling him in on every side ; and about those consequences, as connected with himself, there was all the ghastly incongruity and unreality of a hideous nightmare. He had never understood the realities of life. He had crushed down their impulses in his heart. He had called superficialities essentials ; selfish ignorance, practical sense ; and he had worked and fought in a false atmosphere, and for a false aim.

And now, instead of that fictitious triumph which he had looked to grasp, he found himself face to face with facts so sordid and so relentless that he could hardly recognise them as facts at all. His world was tottering into ruins all about him ; the clash and crisis of imminent downfall and disgrace was stunning him and shaking him through and through ; and in the wild tumult and confusion all the limitations of his nature seemed to break up, as it were, into one blind chaos of protest and repudiation, dominated only by despair. Nothing fixed or steadfast held its place. The very passions by which he had been driven on had been borne down and numbed. The thought of Clemence had become merely a vague element in the confusion. Of his mother he did not think at all. Even that dark factor in his being—the perversion of his instincts as to truth and falsehood, honesty and dishonesty—which had asserted its grim presence with the very awakening of his character ; which had dictated the first steps along the path of which he stood now at the end ; was swept into solution, now, with every other element in his character. It had held its place, hitherto, side by side with the other motive powers by which his life had been regulated ; dictating the lines on which those powers should work, strengthening and developing with

the demands they put upon it. But it had remained the servant of a stronger passion, and as far as any power of support or guidance was concerned it had gone down in the flood. He had no perception, truly, of the moral aspect of his position, no sense of guilt or of remorse. He only knew that he was beaten, that it was all over with him.

He stood there at the window staring out into the sunshine, seeing nothing, conscious of nothing but the gulf before him; as utterly and absolutely isolated in his misery as though he had been the only creature living in the world. The desperate struggle with facts was sinking into a hopeless confused acceptance of them; into a dazed, bewildered contemplation of details which seemed to rise slowly into distinctness out of the fog which hung about them; to rise and fade again without volition on his part. Details connected with the future came first, and he looked at them and understood them with stunned composure as though they stood outside him all together. Then he found himself wondering heavily as to the time that must pass before the certainty that was in himself became literal knowledge. There was no sense of any possible chance of salvation in his mind.

By-and-by he became heavily and confusedly aware that another day had begun; another day through which he must carry his horrible, bewildering burden—no longer in the semi-unconsciousness of yesterday, but alive now in every fibre to its intolerable pressure.

He went out into the sunshine by-and-by, out into the streets he knew so well; and as he walked along there came upon him a ghastly sense of being but a shadow among shadows. The life about him seemed to have receded to an incalculable distance, to have lost all substance. He himself, as he appeared to other people, had no existence; and his real self had no existence for any one but himself. He was face to face with black, implacable reality, and before its presence all the superficialities and conventionalities which had usurped its place vanished like the shades they were.

He walked, always with that chill sense of isolation on him, from Chelsea to the City; in motion, in continual motion only, was his misery endurable. Ramsay was not at the office when he arrived, and a message from him, left with the secretary, informed Julian that he would not be there that day. His absence affected Julian not at all. There was no suspense in

his mental attitude to make him crave for even a blow to end it. To his battered consciousness delay before the final agony had something of the appearance of rest or respite. He did the work he had come to do with a numbed comprehension of its import, and then as he passed out again into those horribly unreal streets there came upon him a desperate longing for human companionship ; a desperate longing to break through his solitude and touch another human creature. He would go to the club, he thought dully. He must speak to some one ; he must get some assurance of his own identity, or its unfamiliarity would drive him mad.

There were two or three men only who were known to him in the room when he arrived, and even as they greeted him they seemed to elude him ; to retreat and to lose all tangibility beyond the yawning gulf which lay between himself and them. He tried to talk, he tried desperately to bridge the gulf. In vain. He turned away and went out into the streets again, alone with the one terrible reality which the world seemed to contain.

The failure broke him down. An unendurable horror of himself and of the world ; a very terror of his misery ; rolled down upon him and overwhelmed him. It was one of those realisations of the impotency of humanity before the strokes of the infinitely greater than humanity which seize upon a man sometimes when all the wrappings of life and custom are stripped from him, and he finds himself in primeval defencelessness. He could only fight wildly with it. Those instincts and affinities through which such moments work out strength and comprehension were utterly submerged in him, now ; the experience could be for him nothing but a blind horror, giving place at last to the old stunned, hopeless confusion and despair. And when at last he dragged himself upstairs to his room in the Temple late at night he was utterly exhausted, mentally and physically. He dropped into a chair and sank into a heavy sleep.

Ten days followed ; ten long days giving place to heavy nights ; ten nights passing into monotonous days. By degrees Julian fell into a species of dull routine, in which he ate and drank, and even slept ; passed to and fro along the London streets ; stunned almost to stupefaction. He went each day to the office and sat there all day long doing little ; sitting, for the most part, staring into space or walking up and down with

heavy, regular steps. He was rarely disturbed. Ramsay appeared but seldom ; his visits were brief, and he was uncommunicative.

At last there came a morning when he reached the office to find upon his desk a letter in Ramsay's familiar handwriting.

Julian sat down before it and looked at it for a moment, his face twitching slightly. Then he broke the seal.

"DEAR ROMAYNE," he read,—

"Your friend, Compton, holds the whole affair in his hand. Marston Loring gave him the tip. You will do as you think best about meeting the shareholders. I shall not be present myself, as I am leaving England, for the present, to-night.

"Yours,

"ALFRED RAMSAY."

The letter bore date of the previous day.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

A WHITE face, drawn and set into a look which pitifully travestied the calmness of despair ; blood shot eyes with something in them of the incomprehending agony of a hunted animal ; quivering lips which would not take the rigid line at which they aimed, and from which seemed to radiate an indescribable suggestion of youthfulness, which made the bewildered desperation of the face infinitely piteous. Two hours had passed, and Julian was seated at his writing-table in his room at the Temple. He held a pen in his hand, and before him lay a sheet of paper bearing three words only, "My dear Clemence." On the table behind him lay a roughly packed travelling-bag and a "Bradshaw."

Flight, instant flight, was the one course that had occurred to him. Such a necessity had been present to him from the first, and in the almost insane terror which had mastered him on finding himself deserted by Ramsay, thoughts which had lain dormant in his mind during the last ten days had taken shape almost without volition on his part, and he had made his plans with wild haste. He knew nothing, he thought of nothing but that he must go at once, that at any moment he might find himself stopped, at any moment it might be too late !

No thought of that last refuge of the detected criminal, suicide, presented itself to him. The realities of life were as yet strange to him ; wrenched from his moorings, tossed away to drift on the pitiless sea, he could not realise what was the depth of that sea, how futile must be his struggles to keep himself afloat. The reality of death had never touched his superficial nature.

He made his preparations with the promptitude of desperation, and as each detail was despatched, one deed that must be done began to prick into his consciousness. Some word must be sent to Clemence. With this necessity he found himself at last confronted with no further possibility of postponement.

But no words would come to him. Little as he understood



it, all the bewildered misery of his heart was what he wanted to convey to her ; all the incoherent horror which was tossing him to and fro. What words were possible where there was no reason, only blind, agonised feeling ? There was one aspect of his shipwreck now in which it appeared only as the end and consummation of his ten weeks of silence towards Clemence ; those ten weeks in which he saw, now, only cruelty and futility where he had seen before wisdom and necessity. His failure, his ruin, had a side on which they touched him only in his connection with her ; it became the failure to keep the promise he had made her when he saw her last ; the ruin of his vision of a life with her. He sat there, staring stupidly at the paper, and gradually all thoughts slipped away from him but the thought of Clemence herself. A hunger, such as his selfish young heart had never known, rose in him for her presence, her pity. His misery turned to her, stretching forth empty, despairing hands, until the sick longing dominated his whole consciousness.

Then out of the aching yearning there came to him suddenly a recollection of the letter he had received ten days before ; the letter which he had thrust into a drawer, in his blind, foolhardy determination, unopened. The end on which he had set himself to wait had vanished for ever. Everything by which he had held was overturned and submerged. But the letter was there still. The letter had come from Clemence.

He unlocked with trembling eagerness the drawer in which he had placed it, drew out the envelope and tore it open. That it could bring no comfort to him, that there could, indeed, be only aggravation of his wretchedness in it, was as nothing to him. It was to touch Clemence that he wanted ; Clemence and Clemence only was the cry of his whole being. The letter was very short, a few lines only. He ran his eyes over it with hungry avidity, and then they seemed to stop suddenly, and all the quivering life seemed to freeze on his features. A moment passed and a great, dry sob broke from him ; he dashed his head down upon the table with a bitter boyish cry :

“Clemmie ! Clemmie !”

Simple, beautiful with that wonderful new tenderness which comes to a woman with the consummation of her womanhood, pathetic in their gentleness beyond all words, the few brief lines brought him from Clemence the most sacred tidings that can

pass between husband and wife, tidings of the birth of their child.

"Clemmie!"

The word broke from him again, a pitiful, despairing sob, and then he lay there, long, dry sobs shaking him from head to foot as that bitterest of all waves, the unavailing realisation of what might have been contrasted with what is, swept over him and overwhelmed him. The reality, touched into life by her letter as though Clemence's voice had spoken to him, which he had thrown away; the reality on which, in doing so, he had hurled himself; stood out before him in pitiless distinctness; and in his ignorance and blindness, in his utter want of comprehension of the moral aspect of his acts and the stern justice of the retribution he was meeting, there was no light or cohesion for him anywhere in the world, and darkness and chaos had closed about him.

Nearly an hour passed before he moved, and lifted a white, haggard face, marred with the agony of impotent regret. He looked about him vaguely, pushing his hair back heavily from his forehead, and as his eye fell upon the travelling-bag that instinctive sense of the necessity upon him which had stirred him with no consciousness on his part, deepened into a mechanically active impulse. He must go. He paused a moment, and then he drew out a fresh sheet of paper.

"Falconer!" he muttered. "Falconer will see to them. There's no one else!"

It was as though the fire through which he was passing had burnt away from him all recollection, even, of his mother. He had thought of her for long only as the source of all that was unpleasant in his life. Now in the sharpness of his pain a haze had spread itself over the past, and all thought of the means by which the present position had been brought about was obliterated.

He wrote for a few minutes, rapidly, desperately, in a handwriting that was hardly legible; then he thrust the letter into an envelope, which he directed to Dennis Falconer; and rose. His original intention of writing to Clemence had left him. It had become an impossibility. And side by side with his sense of his utter incapacity to find any words in which to speak to her, there had risen in him a heart-broken impulse to see her face once more and for the last time.

The sunshine of the day had given place to a drizzling

rain when he turned into that quiet little street which had witnessed their last meeting. The dazed sense of the necessity for flight was strong upon him. Darkness had fallen; he had left his room for the last time; in another hour he would be in the Liverpool train, a fugitive from justice; and in the terror and confusion of the realisation of that one all-absorbing fact, the only other thought that lived in him was his blind desire for one sight of Clemence. He had come to the little street unreasoningly, weighing no probabilities as to whether or no she would be at work; not even understanding that there were probabilities to weigh; coming there simply because he had seen her there before and knew of no other chance of seeing her. He took up his position in a doorway by which she must pass, and waited. It seemed to him that he had been standing there, utterly alone, for hours, when the door, from which his haggard, sunken eyes had never stirred, opened.

As on that other occasion Clemence was the last to come out, but she came this time walking quickly and eagerly. For an instant as she passed beneath the lamp the light fell on her face, and as Julian's eyes rested on it for that instant, he clutched at the railing by which he stood. Then she came on in the shadow, still followed by those hungry eyes.

Perhaps she felt their gaze. Perhaps her own heart felt the pang that was rending his. In the very act of passing him she stopped suddenly and turned towards him, looking into the dimness in which he was shrouded. She stretched out her hands with a low, inarticulate cry.

He had her in his arms in an instant, straining her to him with a despairing passion which he had never known before, and she clung to him half frightened by his touch.

"Julian!" she whispered. Then as no word came from him, only his burning kisses pressed upon her upturned face, she went on softly: "Dear, weren't you going to speak to me?" Still he did not speak, and with a look and accent indescribably beautiful in their tender womanliness, she said: "You didn't think I would reproach you?"

"It's good-bye, Clemmie," he muttered hoarsely. "Good-bye! I—I'm going away for—for a little while."

He could as easily have killed her, at that moment, as have told her the truth.

"Going away!" she echoed, with a little catch in her breath. "Where, dear?"

"To—to America." He could not tell her all the truth, but there was no power in him to originate an unnecessary lie. He felt her arms tighten about him, and he answered the appeal hoarsely, hurrying out the words. "I—I'm leaving a letter about you, and——" his voice died away in his throat as he tried to speak of his child, and then he went on rapidly and unevenly: "It will be—all right. Clemence! Clemence! try to forgive me. Good-bye, dear, good-bye!"

He drew her hands from about his neck, kissing them wildly. Her hold tightened instinctively upon his fingers, and she was trembling very much.

"You're not going—now?" she whispered.

"Yes," he answered hoarsely. "Now!"

Then, as he saw the look which came over her face, the desperate necessity for reassuring her came upon him. He tried to smile.

"America is nothing nowadays, you know," he said in a harsh, unnatural tone. "It's no distance. I shall be—back directly. Say good-bye to me, won't you? I must go."

She let her face fall on his shoulder, pressing it closer and closer, as though she could never tear herself away.

"I'm frightened for you, dear," she said. "I'm frightened. Are you sure, sure, there is nothing—wrong?"

"Quite sure—of course."

"You will be back soon?"

"Quite soon."

There was a moment's quivering silence, and then Clemence slowly lifted her face. He took her in his arms again, and their lips met in one long agonised kiss. Neither spoke again. When he released her, Julian, with a face like death, turned and went away down the street, his head bent, his whole figure tense as though he were facing a blinding wind. Clemence stood for a moment still as a statue, her eyes wide, her face quite quiet. Then she too went away through the night.

## CHAPTER XL

OVER the country about Henley, that same day, the sun was shining gloriously.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon, and there was a clearness about the light, a distinctness about the shadows; which, taken in conjunction with the heavy bank of clouds into which the sun would presently sink, argued coming rain. For the present, however, nature was lovely to look at; and a garden-party which was going on in the large, old-fashioned garden of a large, old-fashioned country house, about a mile from the river, had the benefit of every advantage which atmosphere and surroundings could give.

It was a large party, and the scene was very bright and animated. On the larger of the two lawns, conspicuous among the well-dressed but by no means striking-looking women about her, stood Mrs. Romaine, talking to a local magnate.

She had arrived about half an hour before, and the politely concealed satisfaction and surprise with which she had been received had testified to the fact that her appearance at such a function was a phenomenon in the neighbourhood. Invitations had showered in on her during her residence at the "cottage," but it had gradually become an established fact that she was "going out very little." This was in truth the first party she had attended. It was fortunate that her hostess was not a particularly observant person. There had been something about Mrs. Romaine when she arrived which might have dashed that hostess's personal elation with a suspicion that her guest's appearance had been dictated by motives not wholly complimentary to the party; lines about the mouth which suggested the enforced endurance of a burden from which she was seeking temporary relief, however fictitious; a restlessness in the eyes which suggested an attempt at the eluding of the too insistent companionship of her own thoughts.

Her eyes were painfully bright, and there was a nervous tension about her manner as she stood there on the lawn, talking and laughing. But her companion of the moment—a

worthy old gentleman, with not much acquaintance among women of the world—thought her simply the most astonishingly charming woman he had ever met; and seeking in his mind for lines on which to make himself agreeable to her, he recollected to have heard something about her son.

"You have a son here, I believe?" he said, with ponderous interest. "I should greatly like to make his acquaintance."

Mrs. Romaine laughed.

"I have a son," she said, "but he is not here, I'm sorry to say. He is hard at work just at present. Ah!" she broke off with an exclamation of surprise. "I see a friend of mine over there! I must go and speak to her." And with a bow and a smile to her admirer, she broke off the conversation which had, perhaps, seemed longer to one party than to the other, and moved across the lawn to where Hilda Compton was standing watching her with an uncertain but not particularly pleasant expression on her pretty face.

"Are you staying in the neighbourhood?" said Mrs. Romaine prettily, when they had shaken hands. She was apparently entirely oblivious of something cold and disagreeable in the younger woman's manner. "Is your husband here?"

Hilda Compton glanced at her with a certain tentative triumph in her eyes.

"No!" she said. "He's not here. I'm staying on a house-boat, but he is kept in town over some troublesome business!"

She paused, and then, as Mrs. Romaine made a rather patronising gesture of sympathy, that gleam of triumph strengthened into something distinctly malicious. Hilda Compton had never forgotten or forgiven that moment in the Norfolk garden twelve months ago. It had been no part of her policy to resent it when such resentment must necessarily have rebounded to her own disadvantage; she had accepted Mrs. Romaine's society friendliness during the past season with just such a manner as might sting but could not, in very self-respect, be impugned by the elder woman; a manner cleverly tinged with that deference which points the sense of superiority with which a certain type of girl recognises the fact that the present is to her, and not to the previous generation. But she had hoped always that the day might come when she would find herself in a position to take more active measures,

and she felt, now, that even what she knew to be a slight breach of conjugal faith would be venial, if it would straighten what she would have called her "score" against Julian Romaine's mother.

"Yes, it's rather a bore!" she said. "City business, you know! Don't you think it's very foolish of men to speculate, Mrs. Romaine? Of course I haven't a quarter of your experience, but I think so. They always seem to get into trouble of some sort! But you know more than I do about this affair, no doubt, since Mr. Romaine is mixed up in it, and he's such a devoted son. Husbands don't tell one much, I find!"

Self-command is a wonderful thing, even when it originates in no higher motive than the instinct of a woman of the world for the retention of her society demeanour. Mrs. Romaine's lips were ashen and her fingers were clenched round the sunshade she held until her rings cut into them, but she faced Hilda Compton steadily, and with a mechanical smile, her eyes, a little dull and contracted, meeting the girl's pretty, unfeeling ones. Hilda Compton noticed the change of colour even behind the artificial tinting, and rejoiced at the slip of the tongue by which her foolish young husband had put such a weapon into her hand. If only she had succeeded in making Howard tell her more, instead of making him lose his temper! She reflected, however, that perhaps the truth was not so very bad after all, and hints might possibly sound worse than the actual facts.

"Do tell Mr. Romaine, from me, that I hope he hasn't done anything very shocking!" she said, with a laugh. "I wanted Howard to tell me just what it was, but he would not. Isn't it funny how men seem to lose their heads altogether when they get on to that silly Stock Exchange? The last men one would expect, too! Who would have thought of Mr. Romaine's getting into trouble of that kind?"

Somewhat to her disgust, Hilda Compton found as she proceeded that it was impossible to give such significance to her words as she would have wished. She realised that it would never do to allow herself to be brought to book, and consequently conventionality demanded that she should adopt a jesting tone, and trust to Mrs. Romaine's possessing some half knowledge which should give the words the barb she wished for them. She had a pleasant conviction, as

Mrs. Romaine answered her, that she had done something, at least, towards wiping out that old score. The elder woman's words were preceded by a harsh little laugh, and there was something indistinct about their utterance.

"Just so. Who would have thought——"

Mrs. Romaine stopped abruptly, and a sharp, extraordinary spasm passed across her face, leaving it fixed and old.

The girl by her side could not flatter herself that the effect was produced by her words, for Mrs. Romaine was gazing to the other side of the garden, and it was evidently something she had seen there which had affected her so powerfully. Turning her own curious eyes in the same direction, Hilda Compton saw nothing calculated to account for such an effect. The crowd had drifted away to some extent to the other lawn, and the tennis-courts, and there was a considerable space, sparsely sprinkled with people, between where they stood and the last group on the lawn; a group of ladies to whom the host was introducing a little alert, elderly man with grey hair; a little man who looked to-day—though only one pair of the two pair of women's eyes fixed upon him across the lawn recognised this—exactly as he had looked twenty years ago.

Hilda Compton did not know him, and she was wondering curiously whether Mrs. Romaine did, when she heard their hostess's voice and turned quickly. Mrs. Romaine, roused apparently by finding herself addressed, had turned also—very quickly it seemed to Hilda Compton, and rather as though she did not wish her face to be seen by some one on the other side of the garden—and was listening with a dazed, strained expression of enforced attention.

"I want to introduce a connexion of mine, my dear Mrs. Romaine. Something of a traveller, and something of an eccentricity; but, really, worth talking to. There he is!" indicating the little alert, elderly man on the other side of the lawn. "He is a Dr. Aston. May I fetch him?"

To Hilda Compton's astonishment Mrs. Romaine stretched out her hand hurriedly in unmistakeable dissent, and it was shaking like a leaf.

"I'm afraid I must say 'no,'" she said, in a hoarse, hurried tone which sounded as though she could hardly control it. "I have a long drive, you know, and I must run away."

She took her leave so briefly and hurriedly that her hostess came to the conclusion that illness must be the cause of the



seclusion in which she was living, and that she must have miscalculated her strength that afternoon.

She might have thought so with even more reason if she had seen the strange collapse of her whole figure with which Mrs. Romaine sank back into the corner of her carriage as she was driven home along the country roads. If her attendance at the garden-party had been indeed a desperate attempt at finding some sort of temporary oblivion or distraction, that attempt had obviously failed. Her face was drawn and set, and in her eyes, as they stared unseeing before her, there was a look as of a woman who is quivering still under the influence of some horrible shock.

She had, as she had said, a long drive home, and as she neared her own house that look in her eyes faded, displaced by a sick hunger of anxiety. She got out of the carriage quickly, helping herself a good deal as she rose, however, as if that shock had affected her physical strength.

"Has Mr. Julian come?" she said to the servant who opened the door; then as the woman answered in the negative, she moved swiftly on to where her letters lay waiting for her, and looked them rapidly over. There was none from Julian, and she carried them listlessly upstairs as she went to dress for her solitary dinner.

The rain, which was falling fast by this time in London, was just beginning to patter slowly on the window when she came into the dining-room; and the wind was rising and moving gustily round the house. They were dreary sounds, both of them, and Mrs. Romaine shivered a little as she sat down. Apparently the monotonous pattering, growing quicker and quicker as dinner went on, or the low howling of the wind, made her nervous. She ate nothing, and when at last, the form of dinner having been gone through with, and the servant having left the room, she rose and walked aimlessly to the fireplace, her lips were strangely compressed, and she seemed to control the expression of her eyes with a determined effort. It was as though she were controlling something within of which the tendency frightened her. She stood there forgetting, apparently, to go into the drawing-room, her face fixed and intent as though she were reasoning or arguing with herself. At last she shivered sharply and her lips twitched. Then rousing herself forcibly, as it seemed, she rang the bell fiercely, and gave orders that a fire should be lighted in the drawing-

room. It was a wretched evening, she said to the servant, as though the audible expression of a tangible reason for the nervous discomfort which seemed to be upon her was some sort of relief to her. The fire lighted, she drew a chair in front of it, and taking up a novel, set herself to read with a desperate determination in every line of her face.

Down one page, line by line, on through the next, still line by line, her eyes travelled steadily, mechanically; and then, as mechanically, her hand moved, turned the leaf, and her eyes moved on again. But unless her face greatly belied her, the sense of the words she read so intently never penetrated to her brain. By-and-by that movement of her eyes ceased; she sat staring fixedly at the page before her; then she let the hand that held the book sink gradually on her knee, and sat staring into space as she had sat staring at the printed words. Her face was drawn, and there was an intense, indefinite dread about it which was none the less ghastly in that it would have been impossible to say in which of her set features its shadow lurked.

The room was absolutely still. Outside the rain fell and the wind moaned. Inside the intense quiet seemed to be taking a weirdly tangible form, and to be creeping closer and closer round her motionless figure with every breath she drew.

With a sudden, sharp movement, as though, in taking a too sharply piercing point, her thoughts had roused her to a desperate resistance of them, she rose, and began to walk restlessly up and down the room.

Her brows were drawn to a concentration which made her whole face look thin and very old. There was an expression of deliberate, self-conscious self-contempt about her mouth, but in her eyes there lurked the battling horror against which all her force seemed to be fiercely arrayed. Up and down she walked, no muscle of her set face relaxing; until, quite suddenly, there swept across it, breaking up all its rigid lines, a very agony of yearning. It was as though some sudden and most inopportune realisation, in no wise to be resisted, had shaken her through and through.

"If only I had dared to ask him! If only, if only I dared to speak!"

The words had broken from her half aloud, a sharp, low cry, and as she uttered them she stopped in her walk, gripping and clinging to a chair as if for physical support in a moment

of terrible mental conflict. She was evidently fighting desperately inch by inch for the self control which was slipping from her; the self-control which she dreaded to lose as she dreaded nothing else in life; the self-control to which she clung with the tenacity of instinctive self-preservation.

She lifted her face at last, still and hard as resolution could make it. She crossed the room with quick, resolute steps, looking neither to the right nor the left, and went rapidly upstairs to her own room. A desk containing a quantity of papers stood on the chest of drawers. They were old bills and receipts that needed sorting and destroying, and she had brought them into the country saying that she never had time for such work in town. She went up to this desk now, lifted it in her two hands, and placing it on the table, sat down before it and unlocked it. All her movements were the quick, concentrated movements of a woman to whom employment, close, tedious employment, has become an absolute necessity.

A telegram ten days old was not among the papers to be sorted, but Mrs. Romaine held one in her hand as she sat there at her writing-table. She had drawn it from the front of her dress and she read and reread it, oblivious of the task she had set herself, with an intensity in her eyes which seemed as though it would wring a hidden meaning from the words. It was the telegram Julian had sent her ten days before. She folded it at last with a quick defiant gesture and drew towards her a packet of receipts.

She untied the string that fastened the papers, and out from among them there fell a folded letter, yellow with age, and crumpled. It had evidently worked its way into that packet by accident, as papers will when many are kept together, for it was obviously a letter and not a bill. Mrs. Romaine stretched out her hand mechanically and picked it up and opened it. Her eyes were met by the words, written in a childish, scrawling, much blotted handwriting: "My dear mamma."

It was the letter which she had received from Julian twenty years ago at Nice.

In an instant, even as her eyes fell on those faded baby characters, so suddenly and so utterly that she never realised her loss, the self-control to which she had clung so fiercely melted away from Mrs. Romaine. Before the flash and quiver of recognition had subsided on her face she had seized the

bell-rope and was ringing furiously for her maid. The woman, appearing breathless and alarmed a moment later, found her mistress searching feverishly for bonnet and cloak.

"I am going to London, Dawson. Order the carriage at once."

The voice was harsh, rapid, and peremptory; but the bewildered woman hesitated.

"Now, ma'am?"

Mrs. Romaine turned on her with such a face as her maid had never seen before.

"At once, I said. At once!"

The last train was just steaming into the station when Mrs. Romaine's carriage dashed up, the horse smoking and covered with foam.

She had thrust that yellow little letter half-unconsciously into her pocket, and all through the journey she sat motionless, clasping it tightly in her hand, her eyes wild, her features forced into a quiescence which sat upon them like a mask.

That mask seemed to get thin, to break away now and again, as she drove through the London streets at last, as though the wild emotion which it hid was growing too strong for it. Her breath was coming faster and faster, until her white, parted lips took an involuntary line of physical pain.

There were no lights in the house in Chelsea as her cab drew up. It was twelve o'clock. She rang violently, and waited, her rapid breathing almost suffocating her. No one came. She rang again, pausing this time with her hand on the bell; again and again, furiously, as a wild, unreasoning horror seemed to seize upon her and tear at her heart. At last there was a sound as of the tentative undoing of bolts and turning of keys. The door was opened an inch or two, and a frightened woman's voice said:

"Who is it?"

A moment later there was no possibility of doubt on that score. The door was hurriedly thrown open, and Mrs. Romaine moved swiftly into the hall, turning fiercely to confront the astonished, partially-dressed servant, whose bedroom candle seemed to be the only light in the house.

"Has Mr. Julian gone to bed?" she demanded, and the woman hardly recognised her mistress's voice.

"Mr. Julian is not here, ma'am!" she answered. "He has not been here since the day before yesterday."

## CHAPTER XLI

"MR. FALCONER, sir! Mr. Falconer!"

Dennis Falconer was a light sleeper, and he was awake on the first call, low and hurried as it was. It must be a very bad morning, he said to himself, for the light was not nearly so strong as it usually was when he was called at eight o'clock.

"All right!" he called back.

But the retreating footsteps that usually ensued upon his answer did not follow.

"There's a lady, sir, to see you, please. She's waiting in the sitting-room. 'Mrs. Romaine,' she told me to say."

"What!" It was a sharp exclamation of inexpressible astonishment, and as he uttered it Falconer sprang out of bed. As he did so he realised that the unusualness of the light was due to the unusualness of the hour—seven o'clock only. "Some one from Mrs. Romaine, you mean?" he called, his strong, deep voice full of incredulity and apprehension. Then, as the answer came through the door, "'Mrs. Romaine,' sir, the lady said," he called back hurriedly: "Say I will be with her in a moment."

Very few moments indeed had passed before Falconer's bedroom door opened and he came out with a rapid step. He opened his sitting-room door and passed in, shutting the door hastily behind him, and as he did so the words of grave concern with which he had entered died upon his lips.

In the disorder and dreariness of a room from which the traces of yesterday's usage had not yet been obliterated; in the cold grey light of the early September morning; a woman was pacing up and down with almost frenzied steps. For a moment, as he caught his first glimpse of the race, he thought vaguely that it was not Mrs. Romaine; then it turned and confronted him, and, meeting the eyes, he recognised, not the woman whom he had known during the past two years, but the woman into whose face he had looked with so strange a shock of unfamiliarity, and for one moment only, as he and Dr. Aston had confronted it together twenty years ago in Nice. Every

trace of the Mrs. Romaine of to-day seemed to have vanished, scorched away by the consuming fire which burnt in her blue eyes and seemed to be the only thing that lived behind that ghastly face ; even her features were drawn and sunken almost beyond recognition.

An almost paralysing sense of unreality fell upon Dennis Falconer, for all his practical common sense ; and before he could recover himself sufficiently for speech, Mrs. Romaine had crossed the room to him, attempting no greeting, swept away on a tide before which all the barriers of her life—all the safeguards, as they had seemed to her—had gone down in one common ruin.

"Dennis Falconer," she cried hoarsely, "my boy is gone—gone ! Help me to think what I must do—help me to think how I can find him ! Help me ! Help me !"

The words themselves were an appeal, but they rang out in that harsh, untuned voice with all the fierce peremptoriness of a command, and as she spoke them Mrs. Romaine beat her hands one against the other, as though her agony were indeed too great to be endured. Falconer, utterly confounded—more by her manner than by her tidings, which, indeed, in his slow and bewildered sense of the extraordinarily direct communication which her words had established between herself and him, he hardly grasped—echoed the one word which seemed to contain a definite statement.

"Gone ?" he said. "Gone ?"

"Gone !" she returned, repeating the word as she had done before in a kind of hoarse cry. "Oh, let me try and make you understand clearly, that we may lose no time. Time ! Ah ! who knows how much may have been lost already ? My boy ! my boy !"

She strangled the cry in her very throat, and laying one hand on Falconer's arm with a convulsive grip, as if to steady herself, she lifted the other to her head, pushing the hair back from her forehead and pressing her fingers down as though to force herself to think and speak coherently.

"I had a telegram from him," she said, speaking in short, quick sentences with heavy, panting breaths between, "ten days ago. It said that he was going to stop in town for a few days. Yesterday I heard something that made me uneasy. I came up to speak to him late last night. I expected to find him in Queen Anne Street. He was not there. He has not

been there for the last two nights. He is gone!" She stopped as though in those three words she had summed up all the horror of the situation; and with that strange sense of unreality making his voice stiff and constrained, Falconer said:

"But must you necessarily apprehend anything alarming? Some private visit, perhaps; a painful discovery, of course——"

She tore her hand away from his arm, wringing it fiercely with its fellow as she faced him, breaking in upon his words with a passionate cry.

"Apprehend! Apprehend! I know, I tell you, I know! Ah! have I been watching and fighting for so many years; have I planned and struggled and sickened with fear; not to know, now that it has overtaken me at last? Dennis Falconer, don't palter with me. You know what lies about my boy. You know what horrible inheritance I have had to battle with for him. Good Heaven! when have you spared me your knowledge of it? When have you failed to thrust it on me, to force me to shudder and sicken even when I felt most secure?"

She paused, battling for breath; and then, as Falconer tried to speak, she put out her hand to stop him, and went on hurriedly:

"That's all over! It's done with! Now you must help me. Your knowledge must help me. You are a man. You will know what to do; how he can be saved! He must be saved! He must!"

She turned away from him with a wild, unconscious gesture, as though his personality had no existence for her save and except as he could serve her purpose, and began once more to pace up and down the room.

Falconer followed her with his eyes, standing motionless and confounded. The very foundation on which stood his every conception with regard to the woman before him, and the life she lived, had suddenly melted into nothingness before her passionate words, and there seemed for the time being to be no stability anywhere about him. It was no light that her words let in upon him. Rather, they rolled over that mental tract of country which had been to him perfectly familiar and commonplace, a darkness in which every landmark was obliterated. In those first bewildered seconds his most prominent sensation was one of utter blackness—the mental counterpart of the effect produced upon the physical vision by the sudden substitution of illimitable darkness for a narrow and well-known scene.

"What do you fear?" he said. He spoke almost like an automaton, in a low, tentative tone.

"He has been speculating." She never stopped in her rushing walk. "I have known it for months, and I have been in torment." There was a strange, scathed look on her face which gave the words a terrible reality. "He has had some heavy anxiety on his mind all the summer—what, I don't know. But this is the end of it. Oh, my boy, my darling, what have I done that you should shut your mother out? I have slaved for you! I have slaved for you, and I will slave for you as long as I live! Why have you gone away from me?"

She was not crying. To Falconer, watching her and listening to her, no tears could have been so terrible as that bitter, dry-eyed wail which seemed to him to echo in a void, where nothing answering to it could have been nurtured into life. The contrast between the artificial woman he had known hitherto, and the woman in the consuming anguish of her motherhood with whom he now found himself face to face, was so amazing that he could make no attempt to grapple with it. He took desperate and instinctive refuge in the practical.

"Do you know anything of his City associations?" he said.

She made a despairing gesture of negation.

"I did!" she said hoarsely. "I did all I knew to keep in touch with him. Two months ago Marston Loring could have told me anything. But everything failed me! Everything crumbled away! They quarrelled."

Already, with that matter-of-fact tendency inherent in all men—and particularly in unimaginative men—which assimilates a revelation, and reduces it involuntarily to a commonplace, Falconer had become almost accustomed to the new point of view which had been forced upon him. The darkness was lifting, and he was aware of vast tracts of mental country, destitute of those landmarks which his soul loved, but no longer enveloped in a dense atmosphere of confusion.

A man of Falconer's narrow temperament, confirmed in his rigidity by many years of life, having his set conceptions suddenly overthrown and forcibly enlarged, will be totally incapable of any just appreciation of the new horizon then created; he will be conscious of the spaces about him only as confusing unrealities; the limitations solidified by the mental habits of years will retain some sort of ghostly influence over him long after they have ceased to have any actual existence. His first



conscious and deliberate movement will be an instinctive attempt to reconcile the new condition of things with these old limitations, rather than to reconcile himself with the new conditions. The facts which Mrs. Romaine's words recalled to him ; the character of the man whom she had encouraged as her son's chief intimate ; the character of the life to which she had bred him ; gave definite force to the vague movement towards such reconciliation already stirring in Falconer's mind. He accepted the revelation of unsuspected mother's love and mother's dread, and ceased to contemplate it as he concentrated his mental vision on the selfish vanity and worldliness with which Mrs. Romaine had stood endued in his thoughts for twenty years ; and as his point of view readjusted itself on these lines, her present position, with all the suffering which it involved, presented itself to him solely as the inevitable climax of a simple and eminently comprehensible sequence of cause and effect.

His voice was low and stern as he said :

"Can you not think of any other friend who could give us some clue to his recent movements?"

"I can't!" she cried, stopping in her rapid walk, and confronting him fiercely. "It is because there is no one left ; because I don't know what to do, or where to turn, that I have come to you! Should I be wasting time like this if I could think of any other means of acting? I'm tied hand and foot in the dark—tied to the rack, man! We can do nothing till we find him—till we know what has happened. Think, think, think! How are we to find him? How are we to——"

Her voice, which had risen into an agonised cry, broke suddenly ; a greyish tint spread itself over her face, and all her features were contorted as if with horrible physical pain. She stretched out her hand feebly and gropingly, caught at an arm-chair, and fell into it, letting her face fall forward on its back as her nails pressed themselves pitilessly into her thin hands.

"It—it's nothing!" she gasped, in a tight, suppressed voice, fighting desperately, as it seemed, to utter words rather than groans. "I have been ill! The night——"

The words died away, caught and strangled by the relentless, stabbing pain, and Falconer, utterly at a loss, stood for a moment helplessly watching her, and then strode across the room meaning to call a woman to his aid. He opened the door hurriedly and then stopped short. On the shelf fixed

against the wall facing him there lay his morning letters, and on the top of the pile lay one directed in Julian's handwriting. Mrs. Romaine's physical distress sank into insignificance for him. The physical suffering which had fallen to his lot during the past year had by no means obliterated the lifelong instinct which led him to look upon such weakness as a detail to be disregarded, and of women he knew nothing. He turned back into the room with the letter in his hand, and shutting the door again opened it hastily. It was the letter Julian had written on the previous day in his room in the Temple.

"DEAR FALCONER," he read,— "I've done for myself all round, and by the time you get this I shall be out of England. It's penal servitude if I stay. The smash will come in a day or two and you will understand. It's all up with me; but there's my wife and child—for Heaven's sake be kind to them. This is the address." The address followed, and then the signature.

For another moment Dennis Falconer stood motionless with his eyes fixed on the letter, so despairing in its hopeless brevity, so terribly eloquent of immeasurable disgrace and wrong. Then he lifted his head and turned towards Mrs. Romaine. She had not moved, she was apparently unconscious of his presence; the tense rigidity of her position had passed into a total collapse, in which all her figure seemed to have fallen together as if in absolute exhaustion. To Falconer she presented an appearance only of most desirable quiet, and he hesitated simply as to how he should so break to her what must be broken, as to excite her least. She would have to see the letter! He glanced at it again on the thought, and a cold shock seemed to strike him as he realised the total oblivion of his mother to which the young man's last appeal bore witness.

"I have received some news," he said.

His tone, as he spoke, was curiously different from any in which he had ever before addressed her. It was grave, straightforward, and not unkindly, and it very subtly—and quite unconsciously—conveyed the altered attitude of a stern and narrow moralist towards wrong-doing, no longer triumphant and serene, but writhing under its merited suffering. A certain stern compassion the new position of affairs demanded of him,

and he gave it ; but it was that lofty compassion which is more than half composed of a sense of the righteousness of the retribution meted out ; with sympathy or respect it was utterly untouched. He was prepared to help her to the utmost ; he was steady reliability itself ; but his help was permeated, as was his compassion, with a superior recognition of the justice of the trouble which rendered that help necessary.

As though there was something between her and her surroundings through which his voice must penetrate before it reached her brain, a second or two elapsed before Mrs. Romaine gave any sign of having heard him. Then she moved and turned her face towards him, looking at him as though from a long way off. Her forehead and the hair about it, strangely colourless and dead-looking, were damp. Grey shadows had fallen about her mouth. There was a faint struggle in her dull eyes, as though she had heard his words and was trying to force her way to an understanding of them through overwhelming physical disabilities.

"I am sorry to say it is far from reassuring," continued Falconer.

A sudden flash of understanding and conviction flashed across her features, and its spirit dominated her weakness as its light transfigured her face. She rose, clinging to the chair, but evidently absolutely unconscious of any physical sensation, and held out her hand, still clammy and tremulous with pain.

"Give it me," she said, indicating the letter he held. Her voice was a thin whisper. Then, as he hesitated : "You're wasting time. Give it me."

He gave it her without a word and turned away. It would break her down, of course, he thought ; perhaps into some wild form of hysteria at the position in which the young man confessed himself ; perhaps into passionate repudiation of the son who had so deceived her, and who was leaving her without word or sign. Moments passed, three or four perhaps, and then a tense, insistent touch fell on his arm and he turned. Mrs. Romaine was standing by his side, Julian's letter held tightly in her hand, which trembled no longer. Her eyes were bright, almost hard in their determination, and every line and muscle of her face and figure was braced and set into a vivid strength and resolution.

"We must see this woman at once," she said, and her voice was as strange in its desperate energy as was her face.

Then, as Falconer only looked at her blankly, she added, in the same absorbed, concentrated way: "You will come with me?"

"You mean you will see——"

"I must see this woman," she repeated, tapping the paper impatiently with her hand. "Don't you see she will probably know where he is? She must know! Let us go at once!"

"But if she does know?"

"If she does know! Why, that is everything! I can follow him. He is frightened—he has lost his head. If he goes away like this he is lost. I am going to stop him."

"But——"

She silenced him with a movement of her hand, before which his words died on his lips.

"Dennis Falconer," she said, "help me or refuse to help me as you like, but don't try to stop me. The shadow of a horror such as this has haunted me for twenty years. I bring the nerve and desperation of twenty years to meet it now, and I am going to save him. Will you come?"

Dominated against his will, sternly disapproving, but powerless to assert his disapprobation in the face of the intensity of her determination, Falconer made a slight gesture of enforced assent. Mrs. Romaine hardly waited for it before she turned and went swiftly out of the room and down the stairs.

It was early still—not yet eight o'clock—and cabs were hardly to be found. They met one at last, and Falconer put her into it and looked at her, obviously with an intention of uttering the protest with which his face was full. She made a peremptory sign that he should give the address, holding out the letter containing it, and instantly reclaiming it. Her nerves were evidently strung beyond the possibility of irrelevant or unnecessary speech. A long drive followed to a dingy, poverty-stricken neighbourhood, and then, in a dreary-looking little street, the cab stopped. Mrs. Romaine got out with the same rapid, concentrated movements, signing again, with a movement of her set lips, to Falconer that he should ring and make the necessary enquiries. The bell was answered, after an appreciable interval, by a slatternly-looking girl.

"A young woman lodges here, I believe," said Falconer sternly—"a young married woman. Mrs.—Mrs. Roden, or Romaine?"

The girl stared at him for a moment with bold, curious eyes, and then transferred the stare to Mrs. Romaine, with a coarse giggle.

"Young married woman?" she repeated, with a toss of the head. "Oh, yes; of course! Top floor back!"

Before the last words, which conveyed a general intimation that visitors for the top floor back were expected to show themselves up, were well uttered, Mrs. Romaine had crossed the dirty little passage with swift steps and was mounting the stairs. She went straight on until she reached the top landing, and then she turned sharply to Falconer, who had followed her closely. His judgement condemned her proceedings utterly, but his stern sense of her claim upon him remained untouched, and he believed himself to be merely waiting until her impulse should fail her, as it seemed to him it must before long, to take matters into his own hands.

"Knock!" she said.

Falconer obeyed her; the door was opened with a quiet, sad-toned "Yes?" and Clemence stood on the threshold.

She was looking very fragile and very white; the haggard look of suffering had left her, but it had taken with it in the passing all the physical strength from her face. Her eyes were heavy as with sleeplessness and tears, and from their depths there seemed to emanate the quiet grief which spoke in every line of her face. She held her baby in her arms, and her whole personality seemed to be touched by the mysterious influence of motherhood into a new dignity and beauty. To Falconer the change in her since he had seen her in Camden Town was so great as to give him a moment's absolute shock; it was the same woman, and yet not the same. The difference lay, for him, rather in the evidences of long suffering which spoke so eloquently about that woman's face and form, than in the work effected by that suffering; and the feeling that the sight of her stirred in him was one of pity; a man's half indignant, half patronising pity for weakness and trust abused.

But Falconer she did not seem to see. Instantly, as she opened the door, her eyes had passed to where Mrs. Romaine stood confronting her, her face absorbed, concentrated, hard as steel. A faint flush of colour flooded Clemence's face; then she lowered her eyes, and stood with her head a little bent over her child, motionless.

"You are my son's wife?"

The words came from Mrs. Romaine quick, terse, utterly untouched and unemotional, as though the situation in itself were absolutely devoid of meaning for her.

"My husband's name is Julian Romaine," was the low answer.

Mrs. Romaine made a quick, imperious gesture indicative of her desire to pass into the little room, on the threshold of which Clemence was standing. Clemence made way for her with quiet dignity, and then followed her in. Falconer hesitated an instant and took up his position in the doorway, holding himself in grave, attentive readiness until the moment when his presence should be required. The little room was scrupulously neat and clean. Facing him, a strangely incongruous figure amid such poor surroundings, but apparently as absolutely unconscious of them as of the child—at which she never glanced—stood Mrs. Romaine. Facing Mrs. Romaine stood Clemence, paler now than before, and with her head bent a little lower. Falconer could see that she trembled slightly. Mrs. Romaine began to speak instantly, in the same hard, rapid tone.

"Where is my son?" she said. "You have been told, perhaps, to say you do not know—to keep his plans secret. You must give them up instantly to me. He has made a mistake, and only prompt action can redeem it. When did you see him last? What did he tell you?"

As though some subtle influence from the one woman had penetrated to the heart of the other, Clemence's face had turned quite white. For her, too, the personal aspect of the situation seemed suddenly to sink into abeyance. Her head was lifted, and her eyes, filled with a creeping apprehension, were fixed full upon Mrs. Romaine, oblivious of anything but the one interest which they held in common.

The man watching them was vaguely conscious of something about the two women which put him quite away from them; which made him the merest spectator of something to which he had no key.

"I saw him last night," said Clemence, hurriedly and fearfully; "he came to say good-bye!"

A kind of hoarse cry broke from Mrs. Romaine.

"Good-bye!" she cried, as though appealing to some encircling environment of fate. "And she let him go! She let him go!" She stopped herself, forcing down her passion with

an iron hand, and went on in a tone only colder and more decisive in its greater rapidity than before. "He has made a mistake; you cannot understand, of course. No doubt it seems to you that everything to be desired is comprised in the miserable subterfuge of flight. No doubt——"

She was interrupted. With a low cry of unutterable horror Clemence had drawn a step nearer to her, pressing her baby passionately to her heart.

"Flight!" she cried. "Flight! Ah, I knew! I knew there was something wrong! What is it? Oh, what is it? My dear, my dear, what have you done? What have you done?"

There was an instant's dead silence as the cry died away and Clemence stood with her beseeching eyes dark and dilated, her uplifted face white and quivering, appealing, as it seemed, for an answer, to Julian himself. Falconer was looking straight before him, his face set and grim, passive, not only with the natural passivity of a man in the presence of inevitable anguish, but with the involuntary self-forgetfulness of a man in the presence of a power greater than he can understand. Mrs. Romaine had paused as though stopped by some kind of hard, annoyed surprise.

Then Mrs. Romaine went on in a thin, tense voice:

"There is no time to waste over what has been done; the point is to retrieve it! He must come back at once. Where is he?"

With a sudden quick movement Clemence turned, crossed the room, and laid the child tenderly in the little cot standing by the fire. She pressed her face down for one instant to the tiny sleep-flushed cheek, and then rose and came back to Mrs. Romaine and Falconer, her face white and resolute, her eyes shining, glancing from one to the other as she spoke.

"Will there be time?" she said. "Can I get to him before he sails? There is a woman downstairs who will take care of my child. He is alone! He may be doing—— Flight! What can flight do for him if he has done wrong? He doesn't always know! I am his wife, and I must go and help him. Will there be time?"

It was Falconer to whom her eyes finally turned, vaguely conscious of the absence of womanly sympathy, and appealing in the void for a man's knowledge and assistance. It was Falconer who answered her. Instinctively and involuntarily

he answered her directly, the current of his thoughts seeming to submit itself to hers without an impulse to resist or control her.

"Where was he going?" he said.

"To America!" was the answer, eager and low, as though life and death hung on the response it should elicit. "He was going then, he told me. That was at nine o'clock last night! Oh, if I go at once I shall be in time? I shall be in time?"

A hard, nervous irritation was disturbing the concentration of Mrs. Romaine's face. Futile and utterly to be ignored as seemed to her any impulse on the part of the woman to whom, in the face of the terrible issues with which she stood confronted, she gave no personal consideration whatever; the introduction of such futility seemed, in the strained, tense condition of her nerves, to involve irrelevancy and delay, which she was utterly unable to meet with any self-command. She broke in now, her voice harsh and vibrating with uncontrollable impatience.

"There is no need," she said. "I am on my way to him now. You—there is no need for you! You can do nothing!"

"I am his wife!" said Clemence.

She did not raise her voice; no colour came to her dead, white face; only she turned to Julian's mother, with her hands crushed tightly together against her heart, and such a light shining in her eyes as seemed to transfigure her whole face and figure. For an instant the eyes of the two women met and held one another. Then Mrs. Romaine, with a gesture which seemed to repudiate and deny the influence which nevertheless she was powerless to resist, turned to Falconer and moved swiftly towards the door. "What does it matter?" she said, in a tone of fierce impatience, which relegated Clemence to the position of the merest nonentity. "The only thing of consequence is time!"

She swept out of the room as she spoke, and Clemence turned again to Falconer, stretching out beseeching hands.

"Help me!" she said.

The movement which he had thought to guide and control so easily had passed beyond Falconer's control, and he knew it. He could only follow it, waiting until the turn of events should throw it, as he still believed they must, upon a man's strength and experience. But as Clemence had touched him once before against his will, she touched him now against his judgement, and he answered her in one word:



"Come!"

Throughout the terrible hours that followed; during the drive to the station, the sickening suspense, the brief interval of waiting for a train, the long journey; neither by word nor sign did Mrs. Romaine evince the slightest consciousness of Clemence's presence. Her face, almost stony now in its set determination, never altered. After they were seated in the train she never spoke at all. She sat gazing straight before her, motionless as a statue, like a woman living only by her hold upon a moment in the future, to which each present second as it passed was bringing her nearer.

There had been no time to ascertain the probabilities as to their forestalling the sailing of the boat in which Julian had presumably intended to leave England. Falconer, while admitting to himself that the young man might have overestimated, panic-stricken, the danger in which he had placed himself, had but faint hope that any steps other than the promotion of his speedy departure would be possible when they should be in possession of the facts; even should their arrival be in time to frustrate his original determination. But Mrs. Romaine weighed no probabilities. She looked neither to the right nor to the left. She saw before her only the climax and consummation of the struggle of twenty years, and on that consummation was concentrated her whole existence.

## CHAPTER XLII

THE room was very still ; even the clock upon the mantelpiece was not going, so that not even a low tick disturbed the perfect quiet. It was a sitting-room in one of the Liverpool hotels, and quite alone in it was Clemence. She was sitting near the window, motionless, her hands clasped tightly together on her knee. Her face was lifted slightly towards the sky, and its calm, broken now and again by a slight quiver of the lips, was that of intense absorption. Clemence's was one of those natures in which great mental suffering of any kind passes instinctively into unformed prayer ; and she was praying now with her whole being, with no faintest consciousness of herself or her mental attitude.

She had been sitting there alone and motionless for more than an hour, when a touch fell upon the handle of the door. She started violently, and rose involuntarily to her feet as it opened to admit Falconer. She did not speak ; all her agony of questioning seemed to have passed into the eyes she fixed upon him, and into those tightly-clasped hands.

Falconer crossed the room quickly to her, and spoke as though in answer to audible words.

"I have found him !" he said. "There has been some delay. The boat will not leave until to-morrow, and till then he is here."

A breath of unutterable relief and thanksgiving broke from Clemence's white lips, and she let her face fall forward for a moment on her hands. Then she lifted it again, tremulous and shaken. "Is it—right—that he should go ?" she said.

"It is necessary !" returned Falconer sternly. But the sternness was not for her.

A look of trouble and perplexity passed into her face ; her lips were parted to speak again when a door at the other end of the room opened sharply—not the door by which Falconer had entered, but a second, leading, presumably, into a bedroom—and Mrs. Romaine appeared. The rigidity of her self-control had given place, apparently, to a consuming fever. Her eyes were glittering, the dry skin seemed to be too tightly

drawn across her sharpened features. There was no paint upon her now—no mask, less tangible but no less effective, of artificiality of expression. It was the very woman, stripped of all the trappings of her life, bearing the ravages of past struggles thick upon her, driven to bay, and braced to hold the struggle on which she was entering with the last breath in her body. She was still dressed for walking, and the contrast between the smart, somewhat youthful, apparel which she had always affected, and her face, was terrible to see.

She came straight up to Falconer, utterly unconscious, apparently, as far as feeling and realisation constitute consciousness, of Clemence's presence. "You have found him?" she said, and the words were less a question than an assertion. "Let us go at once. Stop, though!" she added abruptly, laying a burning hand on Falconer's arm, as though in the haste and pressure of her own impulses, she ascribed a similar impatience to him. "I had better know the facts first. What has he told you?"

Falconer hesitated. His words, when he spoke, ignored her final question, and answered the idea which vibrated behind every word of her speech. He glanced at Clemence as he began to speak as though he wished his words to apply to her also.

"I do not think," he said, "that anything will be gained by your seeing him—except extreme distress for all concerned. I fear there is nothing to be done!"

He had spoken very firmly, as though the moment had arrived, in his estimation, for that stand on manly judgement which he had involuntarily postponed for so long; and he paused as though to accentuate the weight of his words.

Mrs. Romayne, with a gesture of irrepressible, tortured impatience, but otherwise with no recognition whatever of his having spoken, repeated her question:

"What has he told you?"

Clemence's eyes, fixed upon Falconer's face, dilated slightly, and then the shadow of a smile touched her parted lips.

"I fear there is no doubt that it is a bad affair," continued Falconer. "There are forged documents connected with it, and misappropriation of money fraudulently come by; and detection seems to be inevitable. His only hope of safety lies in flight."

As though with the very tangibility and imminence of the



danger she had come forth to meet Mrs. Romaine's spirit rose higher, the only sort of change brought to her face by the words was an intensifying of all its previous characteristics of growing courage and determination. From Clemence's lips the little tremulous light had died, quenched in such a horror of vicarious shame, of pity, love, and anguish unspeakable, as seemed to freeze her where she stood.

"The facts! The facts!" The words came from Mrs. Romaine sharp and tense, seeming to put aside and ignore any extraneous comment or opinion.

Falconer hesitated again for a moment and scanned her face closely, absolutely unconscious of his own incapacity for reading what was written there. So far was he from an adequate conception of the realities of the situation, that he thought that a plain statement of details would crush out for ever the hope of which he was conscious in her. And he decided that such instantaneous crushing was the only mercy he could show her.

Gravely and concisely, with no unnecessary comment, he told her the whole story as he had gathered it half an hour earlier from Julian's incoherent, despairing words. He finished and paused, holding himself braced for the outbreak of despair which he expected.

His words were followed by a dead silence. His eyes were fixed on Mrs. Romaine with a vague fear for her reason, and he felt rather than saw that Clemence had turned away and was standing with her face hidden in her hands. Mrs. Romaine's brows had contracted as if in intense thought, and her eyes were extraordinarily bright and keen. At last, with no slightest relaxation of the intent calculation of her face, she asked one or two questions as to details of business procedure, the words coming from her sharp and distinct; questions of which Falconer, as he answered them, tried in vain to see the drift. Then she moved with a gesture of determination, so self-absorbed that it seemed to isolate her utterly.

"Take me to him at once!" she said.

A sharp exclamation broke from Falconer, and, as she moved towards the door, he followed her hastily, indescribably disturbed and confused by so entirely unexpected a course of action.

"To what purpose?" he said quickly. "I beg of you to be advised by me. The boy must go! Nothing can be gained but a parting——"

Mrs. Romaine turned upon him and faced him suddenly.

"I am here to see my son," she said, and there was something in her voice—rather in what its intense restraint suggested than in its tones themselves—absolutely dominating and conclusive. "You came to help me. Take me to him, or tell me where to find him."

Intensely annoyed and disapproving; keenly alive to the fear that Julian, so taken by surprise, might impute to him some definitely treacherous intention in withholding, as he had done, the fact that he was not alone; Falconer yet felt himself powerless. He had no shadow of a right to stand between mother and son. He had made his stand, and he might as effectually have opposed himself to the wind. His words, his judgement, were as nothing to her. That he should so far fail to carry into effect his conception of his duty as her escort, as to let her go alone, was, of course, impossible in his eyes. He made a sternly unwilling sign to the effect that he would perforce accompany her, and then, as she passed quickly out of the room, he looked at Clemence. There was a stunned look upon her face now; she did not even glance at him in answer, but she moved mechanically, as it seemed, and like a woman walking in her sleep, and followed Mrs. Romaine.

Not one word was spoken by either of the trio until they stood, a quarter of an hour later, before a rather dingy door in a dreary passage of an unpretentious and obscure private hotel. Then Falconer spoke in a low, stern tone.

"Here!" he said, indicating the door before them.

Mrs. Romaine moved swiftly forward and turned the handle. For one instant, as the door opened, there was a vision of a dull, bare little sitting-room, touched with a strange glory by a red ray from the setting sun, which slanted right across it; and in the middle of the room, in the full light of that red ray, which fell with an almost weird effect of irradiation upon his attitude of despair, Julian sitting by the table, his head buried on his outstretched arms. For an instant only the picture was visible; then Julian turned his head sharply and sprang to his feet with a cry. His mother was advancing rapidly towards him, but it was not his mother that he saw. It was the figure behind her with the dazed white face all breaking up now into quivering lines. It was to that figure that he stretched out his hands with the hoarse, heart-broken sob;

"Clemmie! Clemmie! They've told you!"

Before the words were uttered, Clemence had rushed past Mrs. Romaine, and was clinging to him in such a sudden agony of sobs and tears as seemed to rend her very heart.

Mrs. Romaine stopped abruptly. Falconer, who was close to her with his back to the door which he had shut swiftly on Julian's cry, saw a spasm of pain cut across the concentration of her face for an instant ; and in the flash of anger and impatience which succeeded it, she seemed to recognise Clemence's presence practically for the first time. She fell back a step or two, waiting with contemptuous self-control, her eyes fixed upon the pair before her as they clung together, and Julian tried brokenly and despairingly to soothe the pitiful abandonment of grief with which Clemence was shaken. His own distress increased with every incoherent word of self-reproach he uttered ; and it was a sense of his anguish that seemed, at last, to reach Clemence, and produce in her a woman's instinct towards the suppression of her own pain. She disengaged herself gently, forcing back the heavy sob that trembled on her lips, and looked from Julian towards Mrs. Romaine with a tacit recognition of his mother's claims which was as beautiful as it was instinctive.

"You will listen !" she said in a choked, beseeching voice, "you will listen and come back !"

She turned away as she spoke, making him a sign that he should not speak to her : and as she drew away from him Mrs. Romaine advanced rapidly, every movement, every line of her face, every tone of her voice, claiming as an inalienable right her son's attention. Her face was very hard, far harder than it had been before that spasm of pain had shaken it, and there was no touch of emotion in her hard, quick voice. She seemed to have put all sentiment deliberately aside.

"Julian," she said, "you have made a terrible mistake ! You are taking just the one false step that would be absolutely irretrievable. You must come back to town at once !"

Her manner ; her voice ; some influence from the long past days when her word, for all her affectation of weak indulgence, had been his law ; had arrested his attention almost without his own consent. He stood now looking at her ; looking at her across such a gulf of ignorance, mistake, and wrong as had swallowed even that bitterness with which he had once regarded her, leaving him absolutely cold and dead to her.

"Town and I have parted company, mother!" he said. He spoke hoarsely, but the emotion in his tone was the reflex of that through which he had just passed in meeting Clemence; his manner was even callous.

"That would be true indeed," was the quick answer, "if you had succeeded in leaving England! Not only town and you, but life and you—everything that makes life worth living—would have parted company! To go away now is to cut your own throat!"

Julian turned to Falconer.

"Haven't you told them?" he said thickly. "Don't they know that—that is done?"

Falconer drew a step nearer.

"Your mother knows——" he began; but Mrs. Romaine interposed, lifting her hand peremptorily without even glancing at him.

"I know everything," she said. "I know that you are in hideous danger, and if you run away from it it is indeed all over with you. You must face it; you must defy it!"

As though in her last words she had touched and given form and life to the very core of the determination which had nerved her since she had first read Julian's letter that morning, her voice rose as she spoke them into a ring of indomitable courage, vibrating with the very triumph of that defiance of which she spoke. Her slight, haggard physique seemed to expand, to gain in dignity and power; as the whole room seemed to fill with the magnetism of her intense resolution. There was an instant's pause, and then an exclamation broke alike from Julian and from Falconer. Julian's was almost derisive in its absolute repudiation of her words; Falconer's was sternly incredulous. Clemence was standing a little apart. No sound came from her, but she lifted her face suddenly and turned it towards Mrs. Romaine. A vague horror and confusion had dawned in her eyes.

Before the annihilating words with which Falconer obviously intended to follow up his first ejaculation could be uttered, Mrs. Romaine was speaking again—in a rapid, businesslike tone now, but always with that ring of triumph behind it.

"You must come back with me to-night and take up your position as if nothing could shake it. You must fight for your credit and your social status tooth and nail. When you have

lost them you have lost everything! You have not lost them yet, and no risk is too great to run for their retention."

"Not penal servitude?" asked Julian, with a ghastly smile.

"Not penal servitude, not hanging—if that were the risk," returned his mother passionately. "What are you better off if you escape—disgraced, ostracised, ruined beyond all hope of reclamation—than you would be in a convict's cell? What would you have to live for—to hope for? When you have lost your position with the world you have lost everything. What does it matter that you go down in one wave rather than another?" She paused a moment, battling with her fierce horror and repulsion. Then she went on again in another tone, eager and decided. "But the risk is not so frightful after all," she said. "Show it a bold front and we shall triumph over it! Now, listen to me, Julian. This other man—this man Ramsay—was the actual forger?"

She paused for an answer, and apparently the insistence of her tone forced one from Julian in spite of himself.

"As far as the actual commission of the forgery goes—yes," he said sullenly. "But——"

"Then what is there to prove—to prove, mind—that you were a party to it?"

Julian glanced round at Clemence as if involuntarily. Then he looked recklessly back at his mother and laughed harshly.

"The facts——" he began.

His mother caught up the words.

"The facts? Yes!" she said. "But if the facts are denied? Can they be proved? If you face this meeting and say that you yourself have been deceived? Even if it should come to a prosecution there are always loopholes! With good counsel and facing it out ourselves unflinchingly, you would come through untouched! It is the only chance, Julian, and we must dare it."



## CHAPTER XLIII

**THE** red glow from the setting sun had shifted a little. It fell now behind Julian and between him and Clemence, and its light seemed to isolate the mother and son, shutting them in alone together. Mrs. Romaine stood a few paces from Julian, not touching him or appealing to him, concentrating all her forces on the dominating of his weaker nature. Julian stood doggedly before her, his hands clenched, his face set. Near the window, looking across the shabby little room from which those two figures, eloquent of struggle and crisis, stood out so strangely, was Clemence; her eyes fixed upon Julian now as though life and death hung on his looks. Aloof alike from Clemence and from the mother and son, a grim spectator holding in reserve his weight of condemnation until the upshot of the scene should declare itself, was Dennis Falconer.

For all answer, as though her ringing words had touched him so little that he found them not even worth the trouble of an articulate denial, Julian shook his head sullenly. The gesture witnessed to a heavy dead weight of dissent likely to be more difficult to act upon than the most vehement opposition, and Mrs. Romaine paused for a moment, looking at him, her lips taking a firmer line, her eyes flashing.

"You don't realise the position," she said. "Look at it and understand the choice before you. On the one hand is ignominy, ruin, the end of your career; to reach it you have only to give way to your nerves, to act under the influence of panic, to run away, in short. On the other hand," she moved a step nearer to him with a tense, emphatic gesture, which seemed an outlet for some of the passionate urgency which she was keeping resolutely in hand; "on the other hand is the very reverse of all this. Social position, consideration, the prosperous life to which you have always looked forward—all this is to be retained by one bold stroke, by a little courage and resolution, and at the risk of what is by no means worse than the life which must inevitably be yours if you do not nerve yourself to run it. Julian, think what is at stake!"

Falconer's eyes had been fixed on Mrs. Romaine, severe, inexorable in their condemnation. They travelled, now, to Julian.

Again Julian made that dull gesture of negation.

"It's all over," he said doggedly. "I've staked and lost."

"You have not lost—yet," his mother cried; the vibration in her voice was stronger now, and there were white patches coming and going faintly about her mouth. "You shall not lose while I can lift a hand to save you. Think!—think! It's all before you still—happiness, success, life! You've only to grasp them instead of letting go. Think!"

Julian had been standing with his haggard young face averted from her, staring sullenly at the ground. He turned upon her suddenly, his face quivering with an impotent misery of regret, his voice ringing with hopeless bitterness.

"They're gone," he said. "I've thrown them all away. I might as well be dead, that's true enough. It might be possible to brazen it out—I don't know, I don't care! It wouldn't give me anything worth having. Social position, credit, standing! What good would they be to me? I'm sick of the whole thing! I've done with it!"

His incoherent, hardly articulated words stopped abruptly, and he seemed to struggle fiercely for means of expression; so fiercely that the blind, impotent wrestle with the limitations of a lifetime seemed to dominate the situation for the moment, and in Mrs. Romaine's agonised face, as she watched him, the life seemed arrested. It was as though he were groping and fighting among sensations and instincts so new to him that he had no words in his vocabulary in which to clothe them; and the effort to express them was instinct with the despair of conscious futility. He seemed to break away at last and rush upon a wild, confused declaration which comprised all that he could grasp.

"Why should I fight for what I don't want?" he cried hoarsely. "There's nothing worth having now."

"My boy!" The cry arrested Clemence, moving towards Julian with shining eyes and white, parted lips. It arrested Falconer, who had drawn nearer to Mrs. Romaine, with a desperate impulse to end the struggle by throwing into the scale, against Mrs. Romaine, the weight of his opinion. "My boy, my boy! don't talk like that, for Heaven's sake! For

Heaven's sake ! Julian, my darling, if not for yourself, for your mother ! I have lived for you. I have had no thought in life but you—to save you, to protect you, to keep you from ruin such as this ! Don't break my heart. Ah !" she broke into a low, wailing moan, wringing her hands together as her eyes fastened on his face, transfixed into an expression of blank surprise as his eyes met hers for the first time. "Don't look like that ! Julian, Julian ! In all these years have you never understood ? Have you never understood how I have loved you ?"

They were face to face, mother and son, all the artificialities and conventionalities of their lives scorched and burnt away. But between them lay that unbridgeable gulf of ignorance and wrong, and her outstretched hands appealed to him in vain. He looked at her coldly, uncertainly, as though she were a stranger to him.

Then, with one strange, gasping cry, she seemed to thrust all consciousness of herself fiercely on one side in her realisation of his great need. In the very crisis of her agony, in the very crisis as it seemed of her defeat, there came upon her a great dignity.

"My son," she said, "there is something in your life of which you have never known—something which accident might have revealed to you at any time, but which I kept from you, hoping that fortune might favour me—as it has done—and preserve your ignorance ; believing that in happiness and self-respect lay one of your safeguards, and dreading that knowledge might bring to you some sort of morbid temptation. Julian, it is the toil and struggle of twenty years that you are trampling on in throwing down your life like this. Twenty years ago your father died by his own hand—a swindler, liar, and thief. A few chance words brought home to me the possibility that some such dreadful taint might rest on you. To keep you from its awful consequence ; to give you such a life as should obviate the possibility of temptation ; to hedge you in with every security that money and position could create for you ; to give you such a standing in the world as should leave you nothing to wish for ; has been the one thought, the one motive of my life from that time until now."

The speech—so terrible a declaration of a struggle foredoomed by its own essence to failure, a struggle in which the foe was real, the combatant in desperate earnest, and the

weapons straws—trembled into an abrupt, palpitating silence, as though her feelings were too intense for speech. There was a moment's stillness like the stillness of death; a stillness broken only by Julian's long, laboured breaths as he stood facing her, his face blanched and frozen into an image of horror. Then he spoke.

"Is it true?" He had turned mechanically to Dennis Falconer, and the words came from him in a hoarse whisper.

Dennis Falconer was white to the lips. Far down in his nature, at the root of the rigid and conventional morality by which he lived, was a pulse which palpitated in harmony with the divine realities of life. And, as like answers to like, that pulse in him had recognised its counterpart at last, through all the cramped distortion that had concealed it for so long, beating full and strong, instinct with the throbbing life of the same great realities, in a dwarfed and darkened woman's soul. Perfect mother love, absolute self-abnegation, let them clothe themselves in what mistaken form they may, are an earnest of ideal love and beauty, and in their presence condemnation must give place to reverence. Conscious, for the first time in his life, that he stood in the midst of that which was beyond his power to analyse or to estimate, he made no attempt at speech. He bowed his head in silence.

Julian looked at him for a moment longer, and then he turned his face once more upon his mother. As though what she saw there struck into her very heart, a cry of pity and tenderness broke from her. She moved swiftly to him, putting her arms about him, trying to draw him into her embrace as though he had been once more her little child.

"Julian!" she cried, "my boy! my boy! Try to understand—try to understand why I have told you this now! I don't ask you to think of me—to think what such a repetition of the past as threatens me in you would be to me—a blow infinitely heavier, an agony infinitely crueller than what came upon me twenty years ago, because of the long struggle to which it would bring defeat, because of the long hope and resolution which it would take out of my heart, because of my love for you, my darling—my darling!" She was kissing his hands now passionately, with that oblivion of any other presence in the room which she had evinced throughout; and Falconer, watching her, fascinated, almost awestruck, saw her, as she went on, lift one of the young man's hands and press it to her

cheek, stroking it with a wild, nervous movement of her own thin fingers.

"But there's a motive power for you in it, Julian! A lever for your own pride, your own strength of will. You are panic-stricken, unnerved, worn out. Danger is new to you, my darling! Look at your father's fate—wholesale ruin, disgrace, and obloquy—and let it nerve you to turn away from it. Look down the precipice on the brink of which you are standing, and lay firm hold upon the only rope that can save you. Take your courage in both hands, and we will face the danger and conquer together. Oh, my boy, if it is a hot fire to pass through it won't last long! It leads to safety, to firmer standing-ground, to a new lease of life!"

She was clinging to him convulsively, touching his hands, his hair, his face, as though speech alone afforded an all-insufficient outlet for her agonised beseeching. And as she spoke the last words he seized her hands in his and thrust her from him, not with any personal roughness, but rather unconsciously and involuntarily as in the very isolation of despair.

"Life!" he cried. "What can life give to me beyond what I've got already? I've got my billet! Like father like son! I'm bound for the dogs sooner or later, and I don't care to spin out the journey. Who's going to fight against his fate?"

"It is not fate."

Through that little room, across and above the passion and despair that filled it, the words rang out strong and clear, and Julian turned with a convulsive start to meet them.

Clemence had come swiftly across the room and was standing beside him, facing him as he turned to her; facing Falconer, arrested in a quick movement to interpose, blindly and instinctively as it seemed, between Julian and his mother; facing Mrs. Romaine, as she stood leaning heavily on the back of a chair, her eyes strained and terrible to see, her face ghastly. All that humanity can touch of the beautiful and the inspiring; all the burning faith; the quivering personal realisation of that unseen of which each man is a part; the human love acting upon and reacted on by the divine instinct; was shining out from Clemence's face. She paused hardly for an instant as her clear eyes, dark and deep with the intensity of her fervour, rested on Julian, as though they saw him and him only in all the world. Then her voice rang out again, sweet and full.

"There's no such thing as fate," she said. "Not like that! Not fate that makes us bad. There's God, Julian! It's trying to do right that matters; nothing else in life; and that we can all do. There's nothing, nothing can prevent us! Oh, I don't say"—her voice broke into a great pity and tenderness—"I don't say that it's not harder for some than for others. But it's what's hard that is best worth doing! Julian!"—she drew a step nearer to him, stretching out both her hands—"you're looking at it wrong, dear! The things you've lost for good are not the things that matter. What one has, what people think of one—that's nothing. It's what one is, it's oneself that's the only thing to mind about."

She stopped, her whole face stirred and tremulous with her conviction, and Julian, with an impulsive movement, caught her hands in his, and pressed his forehead down upon them in a blind agony of self-abasement.

"I'm a swindler, Clemmie!" he cried thickly. It was as though he had hardly taken in the full sense of her words, but was clinging to her, and confessing to her under some blunted, bewildered impetus. "A cheat and a thief all round! That's what I am!"

"But that's not for ever!" she cried, such love, and hope, and courage shining in her eyes as would not let her great tears fall. "You can retrieve the past! You can repent and begin again. Ah, I know, of course, that what is done can't ever be undone! What you have done remains the same for always! But you can change! You can be different, and nothing else but you yourself matters at all! What does it matter if people think you a cheat if you are an honest man? Nothing! No more than it matters to yourself if they call you an honest man for ever, when you're a cheat!" She paused again, but this time he did not speak; he lifted his head and drew her to him, crushing her hands against his breast, and looking into her eyes with a strange, agonised struggle towards comprehension dawning in his own.

There was a moment's dead silence. There was that passing between Clemence and Julian which no words could have touched—the final struggle towards dominion of a man's better nature. Falconer had fallen back. All that was narrow and conventional about his morality had shrivelled into nothingness, and stood confessed to his own consciousness for what it was. He knew that the great question now at issue was

beyond the reach of his man's practicality, and that he could only stand aside.

Mrs. Romaine was gripping heavily at the chair by which she stood; impotent, frozen despair paralysing her from head to foot, leaving alive and sentient only her eyes.

"You must go back, dear." The words fell from Clemence's lips tender, distinct, immutable as the laws of right and wrong. "You must take the consequences of what you've done, and through that pain and shame you'll get above it to begin again."

Julian's lips, white now as ashes, moved stiffly.

"The consequences?" he whispered. "The consequences, Clemmie?"

"The consequences," she replied, and in the ring of her voice, in the clasp with which her hands closed over his, was all the courage and conviction with which she sought to nerve him. "Ah, I don't know—I don't understand—but are there no innocent people who may suffer for your fault unless you are there to take it on yourself? Besides, how else, dear? How can you begin again without having made amends? How can you free yourself of the past without acknowledging what's black and bad in it? And if you acknowledge what's black and bad, how can you hesitate to take its punishment?"

And as if that struggling life in him were growing and stirring under her influence, a strange flickering light crept into Julian's face and the struggle in his eyes grew into a faint suggestion of victory. He paused a moment, his breath coming thick and fast.

"But suppose—suppose it isn't any good?" His voice, tense, hardly audible, seemed to catch and strain like that of a man at the very crisis of his life. "Suppose it's in me and I must——"

"It isn't so," she cried, and as she spoke she drew away from him as though carried beyond herself, beyond her womanly love for him, in that supreme declaration of the truth that was her very being. "You know it isn't so! There is no 'must' except God's 'must' to us that we should follow Him. There is no power can tear us from His hand unless we throw ourselves away by saying that His hand is without strength to save us. Good and evil lie before every one of us, and we must all choose. And nothing else is real and living in this life except that choice and the end to which it leads us!"

Through all the limitations of the phraseology in which her faith was clothed, the great truth which makes the mystery of humanity, the truth which words can only belittle and obscure, which lives not in words but in the silent consciousness of each man's soul, rang out, all-penetrating and all-dominating. And as she faced him, her eyes shining, her whole face radiant, Julian caught her in his arms with a great cry.

"I will," he cried. "Clemence, I choose. Help me! I will go back."

She yielded to his touch, with a low sob, and as they stood clasped in one another's arms, a shuddering moan rang through the room, and Mrs. Romaine fell heavily forward at their feet.



## CHAPTER XLIV

"WILL she suffer any more?"

On the upper landing of the hotel in which Falconer had found Julian, Clemence was standing, one hand resting on the handle of a door which she had just closed behind her, looking in the uncertain light of a flickering gas-jet into the face of the man to whom she spoke. He was a quick, capable-looking man, with a brisk, professional manner, evidently a doctor. Clemence's face was pale and tired, as though with strain or watching, and her low voice shook a little. The doctor was drawing on his left-hand glove, and he paused to answer her.

"I should say that she would not," he said. "It is practically over." He gave a keen, rather curious look at Clemence and then added: "You are alone with the lady?"

"Yes," said Clemence simply.

A long night and a long day had passed, and between Mrs. Romaine and the one absorbing passion of her life had fallen that solemn shadow before which all earthly passions pale and fade away; that solemn shadow before whose creeping touch not strength of will, not love itself, can stand. As she fell to the ground before her son she had loosed her hold perforce on all the struggle and burning resolution which was life to her; she had followed the guide whom none may resist into that valley through which every one must pass, and its mists had lifted from her no more. From that one long faint she had been brought back only to fall into another; in such total unconsciousness, which had yielded twice to intervals of physical pain terrible to see, the long hours had passed.

And in one of these spaces of blank unconsciousness Julian Romaine had seen his mother for the last time. The necessity for his departure was pressing and relentless. The meeting of the shareholders was imminent, and that meeting he must face. He had left his mother's room in the grey light of the early morning with a look on his face which Clemence, the only witness of that mute parting, never forgot; and he had gone away with Dennis Falconer to make those preparations for his surrender of himself to justice which were not to be delayed.

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And now the day was drawing to a close. The doctor had paid his last visit, and the night was drawing on.

There was a moment's pause after Clemence's words. Then the doctor wished her a professional good-night, and, as he went downstairs, she turned and went back into the room.

It was a small room, the best which the hotel cared to place at the disposal of sudden illness, but somewhat dingy and ill-appointed. The gaslight, shaded from the face upon the bed, but shedding a garish light upon the rest of the room, touched nothing luxurious, nothing which its present occupant could have realised in connection with herself. Her very rings lying upon the dressing-table and flashing under the gaslight, seemed to protest against such poor surroundings.

But the figure on the bed lay motionless, protesting never more. It lay in blank unconsciousness even when Clemence, crossing the room, stood for a moment looking down, her whole face tender and quivering, and then sank gently on her knees and pressed her lips, with a womanly gesture of infinite pity, to the pale, inanimate hand upon the bed. It was over now, practically, as the doctor, looking at that waning life from a purely physical point of view, had said—all the struggle and the dread, all the courage and hope, the valiant ignorance of twenty years. And the face upon the pillow was the face of the vanquished—the face of one whose last vivid consciousness of earthly things had been the consciousness of failure.

For many minutes Clemence knelt there, all the feeling of her woman's soul seeming to expend itself in that soft, mute pressure. Then she rose quietly and moved across the room to make some final preparation for the night. That done, she came back again to the bedside, and doing so she started. The shadowy hands were moving feebly upon the counterpane. From out the grey, pinched face upon the pillow two glazed blue eyes were looking with a restless, searching movement as though in want of something. They rested upon Clemence with no recognition in them; but as her son's wife drew nearer to her quickly and gently, Mrs. Romaine moved feebly and tried to turn her head upon the pillow, as though moved by some vague, indefinite, and far-away sense of dislike and repulsion. Her white lips moved uncertainly as she did so, and taint sounds came from between them. Clemence bent over her tenderly and tried to catch the words; and they grew gradually a little clearer.

"My boy!" the faint, uncertain voice muttered, "my little boy!"

A great wave of pity and yearning swept over Clemence, and she sank once more to her knees, fixing her eyes on the poor, worn face. Was it of any use to speak? Could her voice reach to those dim lands where the mother groped for her "little boy"?

"He will come!" she said. "He will come—by-and-by!"

As though the voice had roused her without penetrating to her brain, Mrs. Romaine moved again—that slight, feeble movement so eloquent of the extremity of weakness. Her eyes turned to Clemence with that glance of vague, unrecognising dislike.

"No," she said, as though answering her—"no, he's too little." She paused, and again there was that groping movement of her hands. "His letter," she muttered, "his letter! My dear mamma! my dear mamma!"

There was a restless distress in the glazed eyes now, and their glance tore Clemence's heart. The feeble hands were moving painfully, and as she watched, with her tears falling fast in her impotent pity and longing to satisfy their craving, something in their movements, all unmeaning as they seemed at first, penetrated to Clemence's understanding with one of those strange flashes of comprehension only possible under so tense a strain of sympathy. Those nerveless hands were feeling for a pocket! In an instant Clemence had risen, crossed the room, and put her hand into the pocket of the dress which Mrs. Romaine had worn. Her finger touched a paper, and she drew it out instantly. She saw that it was yellow and faded with age, and she moved quickly back with it to the bedside. The hands and the eyes were still moving, but the muttered words were audible no longer, and as Clemence put the paper gently between the thin fingers, she felt with a sudden thrill of awe that they were growing cold.

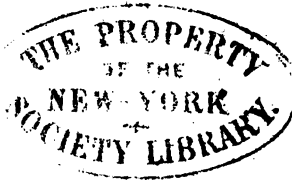
But the touch seemed to rouse Mrs. Romaine once more. Her fingers closed on the paper as if instinctively, and the restless distress died out of her eyes as she tried—vainly—to unfold the paper. Clemence put out her hand gently, and did the work for which the dying fingers had no strength, and on the dying face there dawned a pale, shadowy smile.

"Yes!" she said. "Yes! 'My dear mamma!' My dear mamma! Your loving—son—Julian!"

And with her son's name on her lips, Mrs. Romaine left him behind, and passed from ignorance to knowledge.

The trial and conviction of Julian Romaine were a nine days' wonder in society. The people who had most readily and carelessly received the widow and son of William Romaine, asked one another with the martyred air of those whose charity has been abused and their feelings for morality outraged, what was to be expected after all of the son of such a father? The people whose feelings for morality had been outraged at the outset by Mrs. Romaine's reappearance in London, and soothed subsequently by the simplicity of the position, observed sagely that they had always said so. Both parties were unanimous in the assertion that the young man's life was practically at an end. He had forfeited his place in society for ever.

But Julian himself realised gradually and painfully during the years of his punishment; with the strength of a manhood attained through pain, when he went away to a new country with his wife and child; that his life had just begun.



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